Chapter Three

Socialist Feminism and the Woman-Question

A review of the theoretical work produced in the context of the socialist-feminist movement reveals many significant themes. Taken together, they indicate the important contribution made by socialist feminism to the development of theory on the question of women.

Socialist-feminist theory starts from an insistence that beneath the serious social, psychological, and ideological phenomena of women's oppression lies a material root. It points out that Marxism has never adequately analysed the nature and location of that root. And it hypothesises that the family constitutes a major if not the major terrain that nourishes it. With this position, socialist feminism implicitly rejects two fallacious, as well as contradictory, currents in the legacy of socialist theory and practice on the question of women. First, the socialist-feminist emphasis on the material root of oppression counters an idealist tendency within the Left, which trivialises the issue of women's oppression as a mere matter of lack of rights and ideological chauvinism. Second, socialist feminists' special concern with psychological and ideological issues, especially those arising within the family, stands opposed to the crudities of an economic-determinist interpretation of women's position, also common within the socialist movement. These perspectives – which make up the implicit theoretical content of the slogan 'the personal is political' – establish guidelines for the socialist-feminist consideration of women's oppression and women's liberation.

Socialist feminists recognise the inadequacies as well as the contributions of Engels's discussion of the family and property relations in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.[1] Like Engels, they locate the oppression of women within the dynamic of social development, but they seek to establish a more dialectical phenomenon as its basis than Engels was able to identify. Such a phenomenon must satisfy several implicit criteria. It must be a material process that is specific to a particular mode of production. Its identification should nevertheless suggest why women are oppressed in all class-societies – or, for some socialist feminists, in all known societies. Most important, it must offer a better understanding of women's oppression in subordinate as well as ruling classes than does Engels's critique of property. Socialist-feminist analyses share the view that child-bearing, child-raising, and housework fit these criteria, although they offer a wide variety of theoretical interpretations of the relationship between these activities and women's oppression.

Some socialist feminists try to situate domestic labour within broader concepts covering the processes of maintenance and reproduction of labour-power. They suggest that these processes have a material character, and that they can be analysed, furthermore, in terms of social reproduction as a whole. For elaboration of this position, which shifts the immediate theoretical focus away from women's oppression *per se*, and on to wider social phenomena, they turn to Marx's writings, and especially to *Capital*. At the same time, they resist, as best they can, the contradictory pulls of economic determinism and idealism inherited from the socialist tradition.

The relationship between the capitalist wage and the household it supports represents yet another major theme. Socialist feminists point out that Marxism has never been clear on the question of whom the wage covers. The concept of the historical subsistence level of wages refers, at times, to individuals, and at other times, to the worker 'and his family'. Recognition of this ambiguity has inspired a series of attempts to reformulate and answer questions concerning divisions of labour according to sex in both the family and wage-labour. While some such efforts stress concepts of authority and patriarchy, others focus on questions involving the determination of wage levels, competition in the labour-market, and the structure of the industrial reserve-army. Whatever the approach, the identification of the problem in itself constitutes a significant theoretical step forward.

Socialist-feminist theory also emphasises that women in capitalist society have a double relation to wage-labour, as both paid and unpaid workers. It generally regards women's activity as consumers and unpaid domestic labourers as the

1. Engels 1972.

dominant factor shaping every woman's consciousness, whether or not she participates in wage-labour. An important strategic orientation accompanies this view. Socialist feminists maintain, against some opinions on the Left, that women can be successfully organised, and they emphasise the need for organisations that include women from all sectors of society. In support of their position, they point to the long history of militant activity by women in the labour-movement, in communities, and in social revolution. They observe, moreover, that mobilisation demands a special sensitivity to women's experience as women, and they assert the legitimacy and importance of organisations comprised of women only. It is precisely the specific character of women's situation that requires their separate organisation. Here, socialist feminists frequently find themselves in opposition to much of the tradition of socialist theory and practice. Socialist-feminist theory takes on the essential task of developing a framework that can guide the process of organising women from different classes and sectors into an autonomous women's movement.

Finally, socialist-feminist theory links its theoretical outlook to a passage from Engels's preface to the *Origin*:

> According to the materialistic conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This, again, is of a twofold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organization under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live is determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labor on the one hand and of the family on the other.[2]

The citation of these sentences, in article after article, accomplishes several purposes. It affirms the socialist-feminist commitment to the Marxist tradition. It suggests that Marx and Engels had more to say about the question of women than the later socialist movement was able to hear. It seems to situate the problem of women's oppression in the context of a theory of general social reproduction. It emphasises the material essence of the social processes for which women hold major responsibility. And it implies that the production of human beings constitutes a process that has not only an autonomous character, but a theoretical weight equal to that of the production of the means of existence. In short, Engels's remarks appear to offer authoritative Marxist backing for the socialist-feminist movement's focus on the family, sex-divisions of labour, and unpaid domestic work, as well as for its theoretical dualism and its strategic

2. Engels 1972, pp. 71–2.

commitment to the autonomous organisation of women. Yet the passage actually reflects Engels at his theoretical weakest. Socialist-feminist insights into the role of women in social reproduction need a more solid basis.

Despite the strengths, richness, and real contributions of socialist-feminist theoretical work, its development has been constrained by its practitioners' insufficient grasp of Marxist theory. With their roots in a practical commitment to women's liberation and to the development of a broad-based autonomous women's movement, participants in the socialist-feminist movement have only recently begun to explore their relationship to trends and controversies within the Left. At the theoretical level, the exploration has taken the form of several waves of publications seeking, on the one hand, to delineate the substance of socialist feminism more clearly, and on the other, to situate women's oppression more precisely within, rather than alongside, a Marxist theory of social reproduction.[3] These efforts are important, although they continue to suffer from an inadequate theoretical orientation. Socialist-feminist theory has not yet overcome its tendency to analyse women's oppression in dualistic terms as a phenomenon that is independent of class, race, and mode of production. Nor has socialist-feminist theory moved far enough away from its overemphasis on women's position within the family, and within ideological and psychological relations. The links, that is, between women's oppression, social production, and overall societal reproduction have yet to be established on a materialist basis. Most important, socialist-feminist theory has not been able to develop the theoretical underpinning for its strategic commitment to uniting women across such differences as class, race, age, and sexual orientation.

Socialist-feminist efforts to build on the socialist theoretical tradition have been hampered by the lack of an adequate foundation for the project. The socialist movement has left a perplexing and contradictory legacy. Even the writings of Marx and Engels, to which many socialist feminists turn for theoretical guidance, remain frustratingly opaque. A core of theoretical insight into the problem of women's oppression lies embedded, nonetheless, within the socialist tradition.

To the extent that the socialist movement directly addressed the issue of women's oppression, it focused on what it called 'the woman-question'. Originating in the nineteenth century, the term is extremely vague, and covers an assortment of important problems situated at distinct theoretical levels. Most

3. See, for example, the following collections: Eisenstein (ed.) 1978; Kuhn and Wolpe (eds.) 1978; Sargent (ed.) 1981. Important recent articles include: Barrett and McIntosh 1980; Beechey 1979, and 1977; Benería 1979; Blumenfeld and Mann 1980; Bujra 1978; Chinchilla 1980; Edholm, Harris and Young 1977; Holmstrom 1981; Humphries 1977; Kelly 1979; McIntosh 1979; Mackintosh 1979; Molyneux 1979; O'Laughlin 1975; Quick 1977, and 1980; Young 1981, and 1980.

generally, it has been used by socialists to refer to the issue of women's subordination in all historical societies. At times this subordination is specified in terms of women's differential role in the family, or in production. Most socialist considerations of the so-called woman-question focus on women's oppression and inequality in capitalist society, and the fight for equal rights. The term may also include, finally, personal relations between the sexes and among family-members, and sometimes extends to personal and non-work relations of all sorts. In short, the woman-question is not a precise analytical category, but a tangled knot of disparate strands. Three major strands have dominated theoretical work on the so-called woman-question: the family, women's work, and women's equality. Socialist theory has been unable, however, to weave these strands into a coherent perspective on the problem of women's liberation.[4]

Socialist feminists have subjected the socialist tradition of work on the woman-question to critical examination, seeking the kernels of serious theoretical and practical import stored within it. From this point of view, a major contribution of the socialist-feminist movement has been its insistence that those who use traditional categories of Marxist theory must make their case adequately. The questions that socialist feminists raise – concerning the roots of women's oppression, the persistence of sex-divisions of labour in all areas of social life, the meaning of women's liberation, and the organisation of the struggle against sexism and for socialism – require answers that go beyond what socialist theory has so far been able to provide. All indications suggest, furthermore, that the socialist theoretical legacy is not only unfinished but seriously flawed. An important task, then, is a rigorous re-examination of the texts of the socialist movement, starting with the work of Marx and Engels.

Modern students of the socialist movement often suggest that Marx and Engels produced virtually nothing of real usefulness about the oppression and liberation of women. Even less, it is implied, did they put their convictions concerning women's emancipation into practice. Yet these claims, whether openly stated or merely insinuated, are generally not firmly based in research. Indeed, they are often more the expressions of particular theoretical and political perspectives than they are serious considerations of the actual work of either Marx or Engels. Such statements reveal, therefore, the range and character of the widely held assumption that a theory of women's liberation cannot be based on Marxist categories.

Some take the lack of an important tradition of Marxist work on women's oppression to be entirely obvious. Mark Poster, a scholar of Marxism, laments, for instance, that 'Marx himself wrote almost nothing on the family', and that

4. Vogel 1979.

Marx and Engels 'relegated the family to the backwaters of the superstructure'.[5] More circumspectly, Richard Evans, a meticulous and sympathetic historian of the feminist and socialist movements, comments that 'Marx and his collaborator Engels had little to say about the emancipation of women . . . For them it was a marginal question; Marx himself barely alluded to it except to repeat, in a slightly modified form, Fourier's critique of marriage in an early unpublished manuscript and in the *Communist Manifesto*. There is also a brief passage on women in *Capital*, much quoted because it is all there is'.[6] The carelessness of these statements, made by otherwise scrupulous scholars, is surprising. Masked by the current interest in a feminist re-interpretation of Marxism, it suggests a certain prejudice against Marxism itself.

On a different tack, the observation that Marx and Engels were imprisoned within the limited and sexist horizons of their period provides a somewhat more secure basis for pessimism concerning their commitment to the liberation of women. Marx was, after all, not only a man but a Victorian husband and father with traditionally patriarchal attitudes in his own family-life. Engels, while more unconventional in his personal relationships, could hardly escape the sex-typed presumptions of nineteenth-century society. Both men participated in the largely all-male socialist and working-class movements of their time. These facts have led many, particularly activists in the women's movement, to conclude that Marx and Engels could never have transcended their male-chauvinist blinders to say or do anything useful on the woman-question. Marlene Dixon, for example, an influential militant in the women's movement and on the Left for more than ten years, has argued that the circumstance that Marx and Engels were men living in a particular historical context irrevocably blocked their ability to implement good intentions with respect to the woman-question. Moreover, she contends, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Marxists never adequately challenged their own bourgeois and sexist ideas concerning women, much less those of the (male) proletariat. As a result, the sexist bias in Marxism, originating with Marx himself, actually reinforced the oppression of socialist women and contributed to the growth of distortions of theory and strategy within the socialist movement.[7] Although Dixon herself might not go so far, the logical implication of this line

5. Poster 1978, pp. 42–3. Poster also declares that with the exception of Juliet Mitchell, 'feminists have in general not shed much light on family theory' (pp. xvii–xviii).

6. Evans 1977, p. 156. Meyer claims that *The German Ideology* was 'virtually the last pronouncement either Engels or Marx made about male-female relationships for four decades, except for the brief statements made in the *Principles of Communism* and the *Communist Manifesto*, both written in 1847, and the occasional references to the plight of female workers in *Capital*'. Indeed, 'the relative neglect of the "woman question" was built into Marxist theory' (Meyer 1977, pp. 89–90, 99). Even Eisenstein suggests that 'Marx never questioned the hierarchical sexual ordering of society' Eisenstein 1978, p. 9.

7. Dixon 1977, pp. 35–41.

of reasoning is that socialists who today seek to develop theory, strategy, and programme for women's liberation waste their time when they study Marx and Engels.

Despite its obvious limitations, many socialist feminists have searched the work of Marx and Engels for insights into the problem of women's subordination. They expect, not unreasonably, that the founders of the modern socialist tradition were able at least to suggest some general orientation. These efforts often end, nonetheless, in frustration and disappointment. Reluctantly, those who had hoped for more concrete theoretical and practical guidance conclude that Marx and Engels could only do so much. Charnie Guettel expresses the views of many in her pamphlet *Marxism and Feminism*. 'Just as Marx and Engels had no theoretical work on racism, a phenomenon that has become a central brake on progress in the working class movement in the stage of imperialism, so did they lack a developed critique of sexism under capitalism. Their class analysis of society still provides us with the best tools for analysing both forms of oppression, although concerning women it is very underdeveloped'.[8]

The indisputable failure of Marx and Engels to develop adequate tools and a comprehensive theory on women represents only part of the problem. The frustration many socialist feminists experience derives also from the fact that Marx and Engels did not say what these modern critics of the so-called woman-question want to hear. Or, to put it another way, today's questioners often ask, and try to answer, a different set of woman-questions.

Marx and Engels approached the issue of women's subordination and liberation from the point of view of an evolving socialist movement. They sought to situate the question within a theory of the essential mechanisms of social development as a whole, and therefore paid special attention to social relations of production. By contrast, contemporary socialist-feminist theorists and activists usually approach it from within the framework of the women's movement. They seek a theoretical perspective that will encompass both an understanding of how female persons come to be oppressed women and a comprehensive analysis of the elements required for women's total liberation. Despite its commitment to socialism, socialist feminism's different starting point often leads to a theoretical emphasis divergent from that of Marx and Engels.

While Marx and Engels focused on the oppression of women within given social relations of production, contemporary socialist-feminist theorists frequently try to disengage the issue of women's oppression from the study of the family and social reproduction. Juliet Mitchell complains, for example, that 'what is striking in [Marx's] later comments on the family is that the problem of

8. Guettel 1974, p. 15.

women becomes submerged in the analysis of the family – women, as such, are not even mentioned!' At the same time, she finds the analysis of Marx and Engels too narrow, and too dependent on what she sees as simplistic economic explanation. 'The position of women, then, in the work of Marx and Engels remains dissociated from, or subsidiary to, a discussion of the family, which is in its turn subordinated as merely a precondition of private property'.[9] These statements, originally formulated in 1966, reflect two widely held assumptions within the socialist-feminist movement: first, that women and the family constitute the sole possible objects of analysis, and that the category of woman, rather than the family, represents the appropriate object for women's liberationists; and second, that an adequate Marxist approach to the problem of women's oppression cannot be developed, even conditionally, at the level of relations of production.

Not surprisingly, it proves impossible to speak of women's oppression without some discussion of the family, and many socialist feminists focus on questions of gender-development and on relations between the sexes in the family, or, more generally, in society. These are often conceptualised in terms of inter-personal dynamics, ideology, and power-relations, while productive relations and issues of class tend to recede into the background. Then, when the works of Marx and Engels are studied for their contribution, they are found to be wanting. Contemporary theorists offer various explanations for the gaps, and move on quickly to alternative versions of a Marxist theory of the family and women's subordination. Yet what they have actually done is to substitute their own concerns and categories – a primary focus on psychology, on ideology, and on relations of hierarchy and authority – for those of Marx and Engels.

In sum, because they are asking different questions, however important, those socialist-feminist theorists and activists who today chide Marx and Engels for their failings often cannot hear what they actually said. And yet a substantial amount of the material is there, waiting to be developed. As a matter of fact, Marx and Engels had a great deal more to say of relevance to resolving the so-called woman-question than either socialists or women's liberationists have noticed. More precisely, Marx and Engels had a great deal to say, even if it was, nonetheless, nowhere near enough.

Before proceeding, it is important to consider the kinds of things a comprehensive approach to the problem of women's oppression ought to include. First, it must start from a firm commitment to the liberation of women and to the real social equality of all human beings. Second, it must make a concrete analysis of the current situation for women, as well as study how it arose. Third, it must present a theory of the position of women in society. That is, in addition to a

9. Mitchell 1971, pp. 78, 80.

history of women's position, it must also have a *theory*. Fourth, a comprehensive discussion of the situation of women must be informed by a vision of women's liberation in a future society that is consistent with its theory and history of women's subordination in past and present societies. Finally, and almost by definition, to ask the so-called woman-question is also to demand an answer, in terms of practical programme and strategy.

In their work, Marx and Engels addressed, at least partially, each of these aspects. The next three chapters review this work from a theoretical perspective that situates the problem of women's oppression in terms of the reproduction of labour-power and the process of social reproduction. Thus, each text is examined not only for its discussion of women, the family, or divisions of labour according to sex, but also for its consideration of problems and concepts associated with the reproduction of labour-power. From this point of view, certain concepts play an especially important role, and their development is followed carefully: individual consumption, the value of labour-power, the determination of wage-levels, surplus-population, and the industrial reserve-army. Over the years, furthermore, involvement in the working-class movements and political struggles of their time enabled Marx and Engels to modify and extend their positions in crucial ways. The writings are surveyed, therefore, in chronological order.