

‘Feminism is a dirty word’. What would Marx and Engels think today? - Camilla Power



This article takes ‘dinosaur marxists’ to task for refusing to treat rape as a political issue. The author looks at events in the SWP, RMT and across the British left in the light of what Marx and Engels – so often invoked by these ‘dinosaurs’ – wrote about sex and its connection with class.

‘Feminism is a Dirty Word’. What Would Marx and Engels Think Today?

Bursting like a bombshell over this article as first drafted have been accusations of domestic violence by one RMT comrade against another. The accused man is a prominent class-fighting activist. The woman victim, who took the case to the police, accuses the RMT of failing to support her, and a specific Union officer of ‘victim-blaming’ by proposing that she ‘beat herself up’. On International Women’s Day 2013, she [published photographs](#) of her bruised face, while, ironically, the RMT published a model Domestic Violence Policy for the workplace.

This case confronts every revolutionary activist and will be a stern test for the RMT union as to how it implements its own policy. Unlike the SWP, the RMT have some apparatus of women’s conferences, women’s sections and advisory committees. Will they prove equal to the task of resisting the patriarchal institutional bias of disbelieving the woman who dares to come forward? Their document pays all the right lip service. Will the RMT demonstrate zero tolerance of this behaviour? No person can be a class fighter and commit such violent

outrages. The very actions are politically divisive and undermine revolutionary class struggle itself.

Feminism has long been a dirty word in the SWP. In his brave account, former *Socialist Worker* journalist Tom Walker describes how the male-dominated Central Committee closed ranks with Comrade Delta when a young female comrade was pressured into dropping a rape allegation. When asked what is at the centre of the crisis, what's the hidden agenda, Walker responds: 'There isn't one...It really is about rape, the crisis in the SWP. Specifically the appalling treatment of a young woman who made an allegation of rape against the party's de facto leader'.(1)

The Guardian online (Mar 9) reports a second alleged rape and cover-up by the SWP, detailing systemic abuse of young women members.(2) The victim claims she was told the alleged rapist was going to be suspended and encouraged to read up on women's liberation. 'They said, if you go around calling him a rapist, you'll be in trouble. If you tell anyone, you'll be in trouble ... They didn't elaborate. They're not the kind of people to get on the wrong side of.'

In a March 3 podcast(3) offered by a leading male comrade of the Communist Party of Great Britain, feminism is again identified as the problem. Jack Conrad laments that the issue splitting the SWP appears so 'trivial' (listen from around 20 mins in) and the arguments apolitical. He hastily corrects himself that of course 'rape is not a trivial issue', but in his view it's still not a political issue, so hardly worth splitting over.

It would seem that feminism is a dangerous contagion threatening to infect all these Marxist sects with their privileged knowledge of the sacred scripts. Feminists of all hues, bourgeois and revolutionary, will insist that violence and sexual abuse in all circumstances be brought to account. It is the State's dream to have key organisers of the RMT or even the SWP brought to answer sex charges before a bourgeois court. But the whole of the socialist left currently has no apparatus that remotely provides any means of independent investigation into such serious crimes against the person. It is a matter of revolutionary culture and consciousness to begin to develop alternative systems of justice. Have we got any chance of doing so if rape itself is not considered by marxists a political issue?

As a direct-action, anarcho-marxist, feminist and Darwinian anthropologist – which makes me a pretty weird leftie – I am writing on International Women's Day, 96th anniversary of the start of Russia's February revolution. And I'm holding my head in my hands. Do these marxist sectlets seriously imagine they are going to improve their 85 to 15 per cent male/female gender ratio by putting out this message like a broken record? 'Women comrades, forget you're female, join your struggle with the workers... Yes, you may be doubly oppressed as mothers and houseworkers – but just put your faith in the revolution, dears, and patriarchy will come out in the wash!'

Isn't it time these comrades of both sexes stuck their heads out of their caves, scented the air and smelt the decreptitude of late capitalist patriarchy? Haven't they noticed all these catholic priests, cardinals, BBC apologists for paedophile rings, Lib Dem chief executives, RMT and SWP key organisers accused of violence and sex crimes – exposed because victims increasingly will not shut up to maintain alpha-male offenders in positions to which they have become accustomed? The victims have been women, men and children. But in all these cases, ancient Neolithic hierarchies of gender are being deeply challenged, and not just in Europe but across the world.

But even beyond the headline-grabbing collapse in respect for patriarchy, isn't it time that marxists apprehended the real crisis in concrete conditions underlying the banker bailout austerity programme? This is undeniably a gendered crisis of working women, who can't

manage any more to pay the rent, find childcare and go to work; while mothers are being pressed onto the job market, under threat of loss of benefits, and deportation wholesale with children to poorer accommodation hundreds of miles from their homes and schools. The crisis in housing itself compels more women to put up with abusive partners as they simply have nowhere else to go.

Even *The Guardian*'s Seumas Milne writes of the 'historic shift of women moving left of men'(4) as women pay disproportionately for the banker's crisis. The lower-paid, part-time and casual workforce of precarious labour is female-dominated; as these working women suffer most from the cuts, so of course do the men and children in their lives. In terms of public sector job losses, women in their fifties are identified as major victims – a generation who are highly experienced and also politicised.

Meanwhile, the BBC's Paul Mason, in his famous *20 Reasons Why It's Kicking Off*, specifically identified factors of youth and gender as contributory: the typical activist is the graduate with no future, linked up on social media. Women, he says, are the backbone of these new movements: the archetypal protest leader, organizer, facilitator and spokesperson is 'an educated young woman'.

The more that women come out onto the streets to occupy and organise, the more there will be specifically female experience of protest, including both intense cooperation and revolutionary solidarity, but also, harassment and rape threat, as has been seen to such horrendous effect in Tahrir Square at the cutting edge of the Egyptian revolution. This expresses all the contradictions of a struggle involving islamic patriarchs camped alongside conscious revolutionaries.

Rape not political? Try telling that to a woman in Tahrir Square who faces shaming harassment and threat of rape by thugs bribed by the latest patriarchal hierarchy installed into government. The vanguard of the revolution includes precisely those men who realise the political importance of protecting and helping women comrades to be out there on the street. In other words, the vanguard includes men who understand rape for the political issue it is, and prioritise women's presence as vital for the consciousness of the revolution.

Rape not political? Try telling Marx. The various Marxist sects, anxious to guard their sacred doctrines for the day they lead the revolution, may not consider women, reproduction and sexuality as important, political topics. But is that true of Marx and Engels originally? Let us take a look at what they say on this.

In 1844 Marx wrote: 'The immediate, natural and necessary relation of human being to human being is found in the relation of man to woman.' He continues:

'From this relationship man's whole level of development can be assessed. It follows from the character of this relationship how far man has become, and has understood himself as, a species-being, a human being. ...It also shows how far man's needs have become human needs, and consequently how far this other person, as a person, has become one of his needs, and to what extent he is in his individual existence at the same time a social being.'(5)

'Species-life'(6) in its natural form was sexual life, with all that implied in terms of reciprocity, exchange and productiveness. In its distinctively human cultural form, species-life was economically-productive life, i.e. labour – again, with all that implied in terms of exchange and reciprocity. From the beginning, human production was a dual process of species-life: 'The production of life, both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relationship.'(7) Yet, the natural relationship – sex, – was itself social, and the social relationship, labour, was a relationship with nature.

In Marx and Engels' understanding, the original human situation involved no conflict between the two forms of species-life – between sex and labour, family and industry, woman and man. Both production and procreation were carried on through the clan (the gens, governed by the principle of 'mother-right', with females of one clan 'married' as a whole group to males of another), and were under the reciprocal and communal control of women and men. Men's and women's lives consisted of acts of exchange between individuals as consciously social beings, sexual exchange being as widely socialised as possible and integral to the system of labour exchange:

'Exchange, both of human activity within production itself and also of human products with each other, is equivalent to species-activity and species-enjoyment whose real, conscious and true being is social activity and social enjoyment. Since human nature is the true communal nature of man, men create and produce their communal nature by their natural action, they produce their social being which is no abstract, universal power over against single individuals, but the nature of each individual, his own activity, his own life, his own enjoyment, his own.'(8)

The motive of exchange was not private gain but the pleasure of giving, reciprocity, since, as in sexual relations, one's partner's enjoyment was equally one's own: 'In so far as man is human and thus in so far as his feelings and so on are human, the affirmation of the object by another person is equally his own enjoyment.'(9)

Women's loss of their original equality, clearly associated by Marx and Engels with the rise of agriculture, occurred when, instead of the earlier relations of sexual and economic reciprocity, there arose 'Property: the nucleus, the first form, of which lies in the family' (my italics). A man as husband was now able to privatise and exploit a woman's sexuality, her reproductive power, and her and her children's economic labour power. Species-life has now been subordinated to its very opposite – the lust for purely private gain. The family has become an institution demarcated from and counterposed to the wider community, society being separated into families 'opposed to one another'. This is the foundation of the whole consequent structure of class society. Engels quotes Marx:

'The modern family contains in germ not only slavery (servitus) but also serfdom, since from the beginning it is related to agricultural services. It contains in miniature all the contradictions which later extend throughout society and the state.'(10)

Engels goes on to describe how, to make certain of the wife's fidelity and therefore of the paternity of the children, 'she is delivered over unconditionally into the power of the husband; if he kills her he is only exercising his rights.' As private property, the wife has yielded control over her sexuality and the products of her sexuality, her children, merely to maintain her own existence. Species-life has become a 'means of individual life'. Both wife and labourer perform compulsory forms of labour in which 'life activity, productive life, now appears to man only as means for the satisfaction of a need, the need to maintain physical existence.'(11)

The contradiction is now complete: the very activity in which women and men go beyond themselves and express their human essence – producing for others rather than merely for themselves – has been subordinated to selfish, animal greed. Social production and reproduction, both forms of human species-life, now appear as separate, alien powers opposed to the individuals whose activities have created them. Marx writes of the worker under capital:

'To say that man alienates himself is the same as to say that the society of this alienated man is a caricature of his real human nature, his true species-life, that therefore his activity appears to him as a suffering, his own creation appears as an alien power, his wealth as

poverty, the natural tie that binds him to other men appears as an unnatural tie and the separation from other men as his true being; his life appears as a sacrifice of life, the realization of his essence as a loss of the reality of his life, his production as a production of his own nothingness, his power over the object as the power of the object over him, and he himself, the master of his creation, appears as its slave.’(12)

Replace the word ‘man’ in the above passage with ‘woman’ and it might exactly describe the situation of a woman in a patriarchal family who has lost conscious control over her sexuality, and has been alienated from the products of her sexuality. In her introduction to Engels,(13) marxist-feminist anthropologist Eleanor Leacock writes: ‘In some ways it is the ultimate alienation in our society that the ability to give birth has been transformed into a liability. The reason is not simply that, since women bear children, they are more limited in their movements and activities... this was not a handicap even under the limited technology of hunter-gathering life; it certainly has no relevance today.’ Marx and Engels clearly rooted their model of the alienation of power inherent in class oppression in the ‘ultimate alienation’ of women from their own reproductive powers.

In these early writings, Marx saw a systematic parallel between, on the one hand, woman (opposed to man) as the materially productive sex, and on the other, labour (opposed to capital) as the materially productive class. The class relation duplicated on a social level the sexual relation: it included that relation and stemmed from it. The system of sexual dominance under which women were treated as mere instruments of production ended up treating men as mere instruments of production, too. Everything followed from and took its model from that initial sexual domination.

Capitalist economic principles themselves amount to prostitution, insists Marx. No capitalist could object ‘if I earn money by the sale of my body, by prostituting it to another person's lust’. Prostitution is only the logical extrapolation of the system: ‘Even the species-relation itself, the relation between man and woman, becomes an object of commerce.’(14) Or again: ‘Prostitution is only a specific expression of the universal prostitution of the worker.’(15)

The evidence is that Marx and Engels took sexuality very seriously indeed. Marx and Engels’ dialectical vision of the proletarian future was of a return on a higher level to the ancient freedoms of the gentes or clan society, as depicted and argued by anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan in ‘Ancient Society’. And that meant, centrally, women’s sexual emancipation through restoration of the old equalities. If the root relationship of oppression was the private oppression of female by male, this private oppressive relation was the first and foremost target for revolutionary political attack. The single greatest failure of the marxist tradition has been its inability to develop Marx and Engels’ analysis of sex and class. Yet development of Marx and Engels’ basic thesis on sex could only be undertaken in an era informed by feminist consciousness and practice.

Marxist feminists most often have aligned themselves with a tradition which effectively ignored Marx's own discussion of sex, treating Engels’ ‘Origin of the Family’ as embarrassing and indefensible. They tow the line that the class struggle was primary, while the ‘politics of the personal’ was an irrelevant side-issue – and we observe them doing so yet again as those loyal to the SWP leadership pontificate. Women had only to wait for the victory of the workers’ revolution, when their personal difficulties and suffering of sexual oppression would ‘wither away’ as surely as the alienating powers of the capitalist system were dissolved. Women could fight – but only as workers, that is brought into men's world; women who remained housewives or childcarers – women who maintained and reproduced labour under Capital – had little contribution to make. The struggle for women's rights encompassed their equality in the workplace rather than their position in the home.

Where marxists assert that the working class becomes revolutionary through collective control of its own labour power, feminists have fallen short of asserting that women become a revolutionary force to the extent they exert collective control over their own sexuality. The notion of collectivity – sisterhood – as fundamental to women's power has certainly been central to feminist thought, as has the demand for women's right to control our own bodies. But an explicit linkage of the two ideas, into a concept of women as a collective body, a class exerting class-control over their collective power expressed in sexuality, has not yet emerged. But it is present in Marx and Engels' concepts of earliest human society.

Today, Darwinian anthropology is validating the essentials of Marx, Engels and Morgan's position on the communistic, collective and matrilineal nature of our human origins, and the idea that we are product of a Human Revolution.(16) The revolution which made us human was mobilised through a crisis in childcare; to ensure adequate support for their large-brained and very costly offspring, women (with their sons and brothers) used collective 'strike action' to organise men's labour. In this account, the first word was women's NO! Today, late patriarchal capitalism rapidly arrives at a point of such crisis of childcare and alienation from our humanity. We need once more a great, collective NO!, creative refusal to accept the destruction of health, welfare, education, childcare and housing. That NO! will be spoken loudest by women of the working class.

So, yes the class struggle is primary, but the class itself is gendered. Too often we still hear marxist dinosaurs discussing the 'woman question'. That is to assume we're all men. As an anthropologist I have done fieldwork with the Hadza people, a hunting-gathering group in Tanzania. Their collective noun for all the people is female and plural, including within it all women, children – and men. Their assumption is people are all women! It expresses how central women are to camp life, as producers and reproducers, but it includes everybody. For the Hadza, society is unimaginable without women at the core. And women depend entirely on their collectivity, drawing on that to resist any male attempt to exploit or coerce them.

We need to understand our class struggle in that way. How are we to collectivise and socialise modes of production and reproduction? Our humanity was realised through cooperative childcare and labour. Only so can it be restored. From this viewpoint, it is not a matter of which is the more political issue: the abusive behaviour of men in the movement or questions of revolutionary organisation. We can have no revolutionary consciousness without organising as women and men against any such abuses of power.

As Marxist anthropologist Chris Knight argues at the end of *Blood Relations*:

'We have been here – at this point on the spiral – before. The revolution's outcome is not simply in 'the future' conceived as something abstracted from the past. As we fight to become free, it is as if we were becoming human for the first time in our lives. But in this sense, because it concerns becoming human, the birth process we have got to win – our survival as a species depends on it – has in the deepest sense been won already. None of us would be here if it had not been. To understand this may be to understand, and thereby make ourselves the instruments of, the real strength of our cause and the inevitability of our emancipation as women, as workers and as a species. The working class is the first materially productive class in the history of the class society to have acquired the power of the strike. It is the first such class to have acquired the power to say 'no'. When it understands the identity between this 'no' and the 'no' which women have been trying to say for the past several thousand years – a fusion of forces will take place to generate a power which no force on earth will be able to stop.'(17)

And what the left must take on board is that the first rule, without which there can be no human culture, is the rule against rape.

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Notes

1. <http://www.thenorthstar.info/?p=7550>
 2. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2013/mar/09/socialist-workers-party-rape-kangaroo-court?INTCMP=SRCH>
 3. <http://www.cpgb.org.uk/home/podcasts/podcast-swp-conference-stitch-up>
- It should be noted that the Weekly Worker has done a great job in hosting Tom Walker's article on why he left the SWP, as well as numerous articles on Women in human evolution, the Human revolution and Women and revolution. These comrades have provided space for open debate.
4. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/mar/05/women-left-of-men-historic-shift>
 5. Marx, K. 1963 [1844] Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, in T B Bottomore (ed.) Karl Marx: Early Writings. (London: Watts), p.154.
 6. Plenty of younger postmodern feminists will be abrasive about this heterosexism dated 1844. For the purpose of this discussion on the analogies of sex and class in Marx, I am using his language, as quoted. In this day and age of Judith Butler's gender performativity, sex as just culture anyway and aspirations to 'abolish' gender, of course such terminology needs reworking. But from a Darwinian evolutionary perspective on human culture, it is hard to avoid some degree of heterosexism in 'species-life'. An old marxist's reponse to bourgeois postmodern ideology is to say, well if women's sections are good enough for the RMT (and evidently very much required in that context) how do young feminists think they will work for the abolition of gender on their terms without being able to organise separately as women?
 7. Marx, K and F Engels 1947 [1846] The German Ideology. Parts I & III. (New York: International Publishers), p.18.
 8. Marx K 1971 [1844] The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, in D. McLellan (ed.) Karl Marx: Early Texts. (Oxford: Blackwell), pp.193-194.
 9. *ibid.* p.178.
 10. Engels, F. 1972 [1884] The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State. (London: Lawrence & Wishart), p.121-122.
 11. Marx, K. 1963 [1844] Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, in T B Bottomore (ed.) Karl Marx: Early Writings. (London: Watts, p.127`0.
 12. Marx K 1971 [1844] The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, in D McLellan (ed.) Karl Marx: Early Texts. (Oxford: Blackwell), p.194.
 13. Engels, F. 1972 [1884] The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State. (London: Lawrence & Wishart), p.40.
 14. Marx, K. 1963 [1844] Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, in T B Bottomore (ed.) Karl Marx: Early Writings. (London: Watts), p.37.
 15. *ibid.*, p. 156n.
 16. See S. B. Hrdy, 2009 Mothers and others. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), on cooperative childcare in human evolution; see C. Knight 1991 Blood Relations, Menstruation and the origins of culture. (Yale UP) for the Human Revolution. Also see J. O'Connell, K Hawkes and N G Blurton-Jones 1999 Grandmothering and the evolution of Homo erectus. Journal of Human Evolution 36: 461-485, for the Grandmother hypothesis; F. Marlowe 2004, Marital residence among foragers. Current Anthropology 45: 277-284 on evolution of matrilineal tendencies; and Beckerman, S. and P. Valentine, 2002. Cultures of Multiple Fathers. Introduction. (Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press), for modern updates on 'group marriage'.

17. Knight, C D 1991 *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), pp. 533-534.