

THE INTERNAL CONTRADICTIONS OF FEMINISM

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One of the most striking things about feminism is the extent to which a body of beliefs based on notions of equality has produced new inequalities without hardly anyone seeming to notice. I particularly have in mind the inequalities between a rich, privileged female elite and the majority of other women as well as the growing inequalities between men. These are partly the consequence of changes in the employment market produced by a growing pool of female labour prepared to work for a lower wage because their priorities lie elsewhere.

However, they are also due to changes in the structure of the family which have resulted from the way in which Marxist ideas have shaped feminist thinking and ensured that its impact on a rich, privileged minority has been quite different to its impact on others. I believe that this has happened because those ideas were based on a flawed conception of the relationship between the family and the workplace. However, it should be noted that the developments to which I refer are far more pronounced in Western societies than they are in former communist societies where relatively high levels of employment among women and somewhat greater access to top jobs meant that the motivation to develop a women's movement was not as strong as in the West. I would urge caution on those women's groups in Central and Eastern Europe who may feel tempted to adopt Western-style feminism: to do so would risk jeopardising the progress achieved since the collapse of communism by allowing some Marxist assumptions to be readmitted through the back door.

XX WOMEN AND THE OTHER 80 PER CENT

In Britain, the debate over the inequalities between different female socio-economic groups has been stimulated by Alison Wolf's book, *The XX Factor: How Working Women Are Creating a New Society*.¹ This revealed some striking disparities in incomes and lifestyles of contemporary women. Broadly, the top 15–20 per cent work in environments where men and women are more or less equally represented and rewarded. These are women who live to work: career women who work full-time, and who take little time off to have children. The other 80 per cent of women

are likely to work in environments where there is a disproportionate number of female employees; these women are less well paid, attach a significantly lower priority to work and are more likely to work part-time.

As a consequence, feminists are being criticised for focussing on issues which are the concern of the rich and privileged such as the number of women in the boardroom or in the broadcasting studio, rather than upon the problems of ordinary women. The feminists respond to this charge by saying that they have been fighting to improve educational opportunities for women and to raise the status of female employment, and by pressing for greater access to flexible employment or childcare so that women can spend more time at work. However, the evidence suggests that given the choice, ordinary women want to reduce the amount of time spent at work in order to spend more time with their children; only the least well-off of all regard long working hours as a solution to their problems.² For many, the real source of disadvantage and disappointment is not to be located in the workforce but in the family, for the family is very different among the less well-off. This group is less likely to be married; if they do have partners they are more likely to split up and if they marry they are more likely to be divorced and they are unlikely to have a male partner that earns more than them; indeed, they are unlikely to find a partner from the dwindling supply of hardworking, motivated and employable young men.

MEN: A HIDDEN RESOURCE

If one peers behind the façade of feminism and female independence, it turns out that in the lives of the modern liberated woman the man actually plays an important and very useful role – even if this is not so in the case of their less fortunate sisters. This is evident from the fact that among married and cohabiting couples in contemporary Britain only ten per cent of mothers with pre-school children are the only, main or equal earner. Among graduate mothers of three-year-olds, only one in five works full-time. By contrast 91 per cent of graduate fathers have full-time jobs. Surveys suggest that in such situations women are far from clamouring to do more work, although once their children are at school this changes. Even then it is those with partners who are more likely to be able to return to work when their children are older than those without.³

In such privileged households men work just as hard as women, albeit more outside the household than in. This had led feminists to complain that if men did more housework and childcare women could work more outside the home. However, the available evidence suggests that on the whole men are responsive to women's preferences in this regard.⁴ Research indicates that in both the immediate and longer term, it is the mother's employment schedules that determine the levels of

paternal involvement with the father increasing the hours spent on childcare as the mother spends longer at work.⁵ The paternal involvement in housework and childcare enhances life satisfaction for both partners with the result that they live happier lives.⁶

It also appears that overall men do earn more than women (and consequently contribute 72 per cent of the total tax take) while women are responsible for 70 per cent of domestic expenditure; these figures draw attention to the contrast between the lives of a privileged elite with male partners who contribute significantly to domestic expenditure and those who lack male partners.^{7 8}

Finally, it is clear that the high level of female employment depends largely on informal childcare with grandparents providing 42 per cent and resident partners 20 per cent of the care provided; non-resident partners play only a negligible role.

Women with partners inevitably have far more access to childcare not only because this can be provided by the partner but also because there will be two sets of grandparents to give support, rather than one. Such resources are especially important to those on low wages. Meanwhile, many ordinary women become more dependent on the state or on poorly paid employment for the lack of an adequate supply of male providers.

MARX AND FEMINISM – A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE

To understand how we arrived at this situation it is necessary to dig deep into core feminist assumptions and to reflect on the blind faith which early feminist myth makers such as Kate Millet and Germaine Greer placed in two middle-class, middle-aged males: Engels and Marx. Greer, Millet and others quoted extensively from both and more recent theoreticians have continued to acknowledge their role with pride. According to an article in the *International Socialist Review*: “It is no exaggeration to say that Engels’ work has defined the terms of debate around the origin of women’s oppression for the last 100 years.”⁹ Another feminist theoretician credits him thus: “His analysis has been indispensable to my organising. He penetrates capitalist reality including in my own life and, from what I can see, in other people’s, as no one else does, and helps keep me focussed on that reality by warding off invasions of the enemy’s logic, excuses and invitations to egomania. I am profoundly grateful for that help.”¹⁰ A universalistic theory which sought to upend traditional social institutions was no doubt popular to Sixties women, helping to knit their discontents, post-pill confusion and serious disadvantages and privations into a comprehensive theoretical whole. For the socialists, feminism provided a neat solution to the problems of the practical application of class.¹¹

There is one key aspect of Marxist-Engelsian theory which I would identify as crucial to the formation of feminism; the underlying assumption on which all other theoretical innovations depend. That is the identification of the means of production, i.e. the workplace and its political apparatus, as the heart of society and the site of potential transformation. All change stems from here. Marx expresses it thus:

The mode of production of material life conditions the general processes of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness...¹²

Similarly, Engels traces the origins of what he refers to as the “world historical defeat of the female sex” as lying in the development of technology, for example the cattle-drawn plough, which women’s childcare responsibilities prevented them from using. This results in men having ownership of surplus resources which they need to pass on to their children. To do so they need to gain control of the women through whom inheritance would otherwise occur. What follows from this is the subordination of the family and women within it for the purposes of transferring wealth:

The woman was degraded and reduced to servitude, she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children.

Monogamous marriage is regarded by Engels as the “subjugation of the one sex by the other”¹³. For Marx the woman is similarly subjugated but his focus is more on the reproduction of the labour force than on the transfer of wealth:

The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that [under communism] the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and, naturally, can come to no other conclusion than that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to women.¹⁴

THE SPAWN OF MARX AND MILLET

The fundamental belief about the relationship of the family to the means of production forms the plate tectonics of feminism. Through feminism Engels’ words are still with us today:

Then it will be plain that the first condition for the liberation of the wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public industry, and that this in turn demands the abolition of the monogamous family as the economic unit of society...

In its early days feminism focussed unambiguously on the need to destroy the family. For example this is what Kate Millet had to say:

“Why are we here today?” “To make revolution.” “What kind of revolution?” she replied. “The Cultural Revolution.” “And how do we make Cultural Revolution?” “By destroying the American family!” “How do we destroy the family?” “By destroying the American Patriarch.” “And how do we destroy the American Patriarch?” “By taking away his power!” “How do we do that?” “By destroying monogamy!”¹⁵

And so on. Germaine Greer wrote in *The Female Eunuch*: “Women’s Liberation, if it abolishes the patriarchal family, will abolish a necessary substructure of the authoritarian state; ... so let’s get on with it”.¹⁶

The need to excise the father from family life became part of mainstream thinking. So for example Anna Coote in a 1991 article for *The Guardian* has this to say:

The father is no longer essential to the economic survival of the unit. Men haven’t kept up with the changes in society; they don’t know how to be parents. Nobody has taught them: where are the cultural institutions to tell them that being a parent is a good thing? They don’t exist. At the same time, women don’t have many expectations of what men might provide.¹⁷

The British journalist Polly Toynbee takes a similar line:

Women and children will suffer needlessly until the state faces up to the reality of its own inability to do anything about the revolution in national morals. What it can do is shape a society that makes a place for women and children as family units, self-sufficient and independent.¹⁸

This is just what the state proceeded to do. One example of this can be found in the fact the British tax system has ensured that lower income families are better off living apart. The Institute of Fiscal Studies has calculated that in 2010, 95 per cent of single people would incur a “couple penalty” if they married or started living together as couples. 89 per cent of existing couples with children presently incur a couple penalty of averaging £109 per week.¹⁹ A recent pamphlet shows how much better off a family is when its members separate. It explains that if the family stays together the main provider (usually a father) is caught in a tax trap and does not escape the high effective tax rates until his salary reaches £38,000. If he chooses to live apart from his family he could escape the tax trap at about 16k while the mother could access state benefits as a lone parent with children. The authors conclude that:

The high Marginal Effective Tax Rates across a large income range are not only a disincentive to earn more but reduce pressure on employers to pay better wages, creating instead a dependency on welfare. The system destroys aspiration, denies the father the opportunity to provide for his family, discourages extra work and holds back business. Worse still it encourages family separation.²⁰

All of this has been accompanied by a strong emphasis on female employment and tax policies which put pressure on women to go out to work. As men are regarded as marginal to the family there is little focus on male employment or on the ever declining educational performance of men. At the same time the inability to effectively perform the provider role is used by the courts, legal system and mothers as a stick to beat men with and further exclude them from family life.²¹ I would argue that it is precisely the resulting dearth of motivated, employable educated men which constitutes the real difference between the lives of ordinary women and those of the privileged few.

TRANSFORMING MEN

This provider role, which feminists are so intent on undermining, is not about creating dependency among women, nor even is it necessarily about provisioning them – although of course this is extremely valuable. It is part of a process of motivating, socialising and getting the most out of men. Geoff Dench has written a book in which this is convincingly and elegantly argued:

... if women go too far in pressing for symmetry, and in trying to change the rules of the game, men will simply decide not to play. The traditional male weapons in the sex war are non-cooperation in domestic chores, and flight. The traditional female weapon is celebration of paternity and male responsibility; as it is this which is the proven key to male commitment. If women now choose to define this as patriarchal oppression and withdraw the notion that men's family role is important then they are throwing away their best trick. Feminism, in dismantling patriarchy, is simply reviving the underlying greater natural freedom of men...

And:

... the current attack on patriarchal conventions is surely promoting... a plague of feckless jobs, who leave all real work to women and gravitate towards the margins of society where males naturally hang around unless culture gives them a reason to do otherwise. The family may be a myth, but it is a myth that works to make men tolerably useful.²²

Dench's hypothesis is supported by a wide range of evidence. It has been found that male unemployment and low income increased rates of union dissolution whilst the opposite had a positive effect on marriage. Married couples are much more likely to divorce if the mother is the only earner. An unemployed husband is more likely to choose to leave a relationship than a married man with a job; there is a positive correlation between good labour market participation and lasting marriage for fathers at all educational levels.²³

PUTTING THE HEART BACK IN THE HOME

For Engels, the shift towards agricultural production increased the productivity of labour which in turn increased the demand for labour, because it meant more surplus could be produced. Reproduction was at the service of production. In the real world relations are the other way around. People work in order to feed and provide their family and this seems to occur regardless of sex or age. So for example if we look at the employment patterns of women we find that the category of women who have raised their workplace participation the most and most rapidly are precisely mothers with young children, suggesting that reproduction is a push towards work. However, this does not mean that they have prioritised employment. The clear preference of most women for part-time work strongly supports the conclusion that work is valued insofar as it fits in with family and community life and serves those purposes.²⁴

Reproductive relations seem to be central for men too. Dench in his research finds that it is among men who don't have partners expecting them to earn a living that the worklessness is heaviest. He suggests that this is not simply a matter of women choosing partners who work. It is also that men who do not get the experience of living with and providing at least some support for a female partner may not develop the necessary motivations to hold down a job.²⁵

What is also interesting is that grandmothers turn out to be more likely to be working than other women of their age and their decision to work tends to coincide with their daughters' decision not to work. Thus the behaviour of different members of the family is determined by the needs of the youngest – this is the driving force and, as Darwin discovered only a few years before Engels wrote his tome, it is this instinct which determines the survival of the race.

Once the primacy of private relations is acknowledged the heart is put back into society. The stage is then set for some very positive social changes.

Indeed, faced with the problem of combating poverty policymakers with an understanding that individuals can be motivated through the opportunity to support their loved ones will set about devising policy approaches that recognise

not only the needs of women and children but which also seek to release the potential of that far more challenging group – men.

A workplace relation is based occasionally on exploitation, but always on exchange of labour for a wage. As more and more women have entered the economy the work done in the household has moved into the workplace. Thus, despite their best intentions feminists are vulnerable to the accusation that they have brought even the most intimate caring relations under capitalist control.

By contrast, familial relations are based on trust, love and interdependence; in such an environment material and non-material goods circulate through reciprocity and exchange. Where families are strong these networks will be outward-looking and will come to include more and more people who are not necessarily related by blood, providing additional sources of support and exchange. In this way, the flourishing of family-type relationships based on care rather than self-interest can act as a protective buffer, compensating for a weakening welfare state.

A strong domestic realm has been shown to contribute to gender equality; this is most likely to occur where the home is a unit of production. Social reproduction where varied social networks spiral outwards from the family could compensate for the loss of role in material production. This could serve to promote gender equality by increasing the power and influence of the home.

In traditional societies the family often provided the mediating link between production and reproduction. Those who earned more were able to have more children and this helped to redistribute their wealth. The less well-off restricted the number of children they had, when they were able to, in order to better look after the few, although in developing countries poor families might have many children in the hope that at least one might provide for them in old age. The erosion of the family has broken these links and thus a mechanism which had a regulatory role facilitating equality has been destroyed. For example the very wealthy now tend to have very few children, thus concentrating wealth in fewer hands. The less well-off appear to have more children presumably because children attract state benefits. A focus on the family unit for tax and benefit purposes might help to restore the family's regulatory and supportive role.

CONCLUSION

Feminism wrought essential social change from which we have all benefitted. The place of feminists in history is secure. However, social landscapes constantly change and if the feminist movement is again to be constructive it will need to significantly adapt. If this is not happening this has much to do with the absence

of any serious critical analysis of feminist ideas and assumptions. Standing in the way of such an analysis is the tendency to regard the body of feminist theory as if it were objectively true rather than as the theoretical basis for practical action to achieve change. This brief essay is intended to provide just such an analysis as the first step in providing an alternative approach to understanding gender relations which which I believe is better suited to our times and circumstances.

¹ Wolf, A., *The XX Factor: How Working Women Are Creating a New Society*, London, Profile Books, 2013.

² See for example <http://www.netmums.com/home/netmums-campaigns/the-great-work-debate>
Or Alakeson, V., "The Price of Motherhood: women and part-time work", Resolution Foundation, 2012.

³ Dench, G., *What Women Want: Evidence from British Social Attitudes*, London, Hera Trust, 2010.

⁴ Bloemen, H. G. and Stancanelli, E. G. F., "Market hours, household work, child care, and wage rates of partners: an empirical analysis", in *Review of Economics of the Household*, 2013. DOI:10.1007/s11150-013-9219-4.

⁵ Norman, H., Elliot, M. and Fagan, C., "Which fathers are the most involved in taking care of their toddlers in the UK? An investigation of the predictors of paternal involvement", in *Community, Work and Family*, 2013. DOI:10.1080/13668803.2013.862361.

⁶ Agache, A., Leyendecker, B., Schafermeier, E., Scholmerich, A., "Paternal involvement elevates trajectories of life satisfaction during transition to parenthood", in *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 2013. DOI: 10.1080/17405629.2013.851025.

⁷ <https://j4mb.wordpress.com/british-men-pay-72-of-the-income-tax-collected-in-the-uk-women-just-28-so-why-does-the-state-relentlessly-assault-men-and-boys-while-advantaging-women-and-girls/>

⁸ <http://she-conomy.com/facts-on-women>

⁹ Smith, S., "Engels and the origin of women's oppression", in *International Socialist Review*, issue 2, 1997.

¹⁰ James, S., *Marx and feminism*, Crossroads Books, 1994.

¹¹ Lyndon, N., *Sexual Politics; Heresies on Sex, Gender and Feminism*, 2014.

¹² Marx, K., *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Progress Publishers, 1955.

¹³ Engels, F., "The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State", 1884, in *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings*, Miriam Schneir, 1972.

¹⁴ Marx K. and Engels F., *The Communist Manifesto*, New York, 1948, p. 27. Engels, *op cit*.

¹⁵ www.frontpagemag.com/2014/mallorymillett/marxist-feminisms-ruined-lives/

¹⁶ Greer, p. 326

¹⁷ "The Parent Trap", *The Guardian*, 16 September 1991. Cited from Neil Lyndon, *op. cit*.

¹⁸ "The worm-turned syndrome", in *The Observer*, 17 October 1989.

¹⁹ Draper, D., Beighton L., *Independent Taxation – 25 years on*, CARE, 2013, p. 33.

²⁰ Fennel, A., *Who Cares about the Family?*, Mothers at Home Matter, 2015, p. 14.

²¹ Bryan, D. M., "To Parent or provide? The effect of the provider role on low-income men's decisions about fatherhood and paternal engagement", in *Fathering*, 2013, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 71–89. DOI: 10.3149/fth.1101.71

²² Dench, G., *Transforming Men: Changing Patterns of Dependency and Dominance in Gender Relations*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 1996.

²³ Brown, B., "Reviewing Gendered Employment Policies", in *Men for Tomorrow*, 2014, working paper 09/14.

²⁴ Brown, B. and Dench, G., *The Family Strikes Back: Changing Attitudes to Work and Family*, London, Hera Trust, 2014.

²⁵ Dench, G., *What Women Want; Evidence from British Social Attitudes*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 2011.