

Engels for Our Times: Gender, Social Reproduction, and Revolution?

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It is surprising how often in Marxist accounts of women's oppression Frederick Engels is overlooked. He is dismissed for being deterministic, overly economic, even un-Marxist. Heather Brown's key work on Karl Marx and gender sees Engels as crudely mechanical compared to Marx.¹ A more recent assessment claims that Engels's writings

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on women represented "a momentous revision of Marx."² Lise Vogel, a landmark writer on Marx

and gender, holds Engels responsible for later, mistaken capitalism-and-patriarchy dualistic explanations of women's oppression.³ For other Marxist social reproduction theorists, Engels simply does not figure into the conversation. In a 2017 collection on Social Reproduction Theory and based on Marxist political economy, Engels is not mentioned once in his own right, only as a joint author with Marx.⁴

Yet Engels, unlike Marx, devoted a whole book to the origins of women's oppression: *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, which challenged the accepted view of the nuclear family as natural and universal.

It remained the go-to text for many earlier socialist women, such as Eleanor Marx, Clara Zetkin, Rosa Luxemburg, and Alexandra Kollontai, as well as those of the generations who came later, such as Claudia Jones and Angela Davis. On the centenary of the publication of *The Origin of the Family*, feminists of different persuasions thought Engels important



Friedrich Engels in 1868. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Engelss56fe1.jpg>, uploaded 2006-01-16 by w:User:Bronks. Author: George Lester, Manchester photographer. Public Domain (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Engelss56fe1.jpg>)

¹ ↪ Heather A. Brown, *Marx on Gender and the Family: A Critical Study* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2013), 174–75.

² ↪ Vincent Streichhahn, "Friedrich Engels: From the 'Woman Question' to Social Reproduction Theory," in *Engels @200: Reading Friedrich Engels in the 21st Century*, ed. Frank Jacob (Darmstadt: Büchner Verlag, 2020), 235–70.

³ ↪ Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2013), 136.

⁴ ↪ Tithi Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto, 2017).

enough to devote a volume to reassessing his legacy.⁵ If one includes also Engels's book on nineteenth-century working-class life in Manchester, described by Eric Hobsbawm as pathbreaking and which contained prescient insights into changing gender roles, the case that Engels has little to offer regarding gender oppression simply does not stand up. As I will argue here, Engels's tools of analysis are vital to us understanding—and finding ways out of—gender oppression today.

Engels's Sources

The Origin of the Family, written in 1884, relied heavily on Marx's notes on the work of U.S. anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, whose Ancient Society had appeared a decade earlier. Morgan followed contemporary evolutionary thinking in characterising human history in progressive stages as "savagery," "barbarism," and "civilisation," labels reflective of the biased, Eurocentric thinking of his day. Unlike his contemporaries, however, Morgan praised the ancient gentes kinship arrangements of early societies for their egalitarian character and for the fact that women within them, in contrast to later societies, had considerable power. Morgan's sources for the character of the communal societies that existed some one hundred thousand years ago were mainly recent or still existing Indigenous peoples, such as those of Australia and Central America, as well as the Iroquois peoples of upstate New York.

Marx's comments on Morgan, written between 1880 and 1882 and published only in the 1970s as Marx's Ethnological Notebooks, consist of copious handwritten notes and tables in German, English, French, and Greek.⁶ They reveal Marx's enthusiasm for Morgan's ideas. Marx was living through the rapid spread of capitalism across the globe and its transformation of societies. His collaboration in the First International put him in contact with international revolutionaries from societies that still contained large swathes of older social forms. For example, many Russian socialists were interested in the traditional peasant community, represented by the mir, which was organised along communal lines, and wondered how much it offered a model for a future socialist society. These debates rekindled the interest of both Marx's and Engels, already evident in The German Ideology, in the historical development of human societies and how the increasing division of labour and development of productive forces ousted earlier egalitarian relations, including those between women and men.

Marx did not share Engels's verdict that Ancient Society was as significant as Charles Darwin's work on evolution, but he was impressed with Morgan's writings. One thing that he singled out was the significance of Morgan's basic premise that "the family did not carry society along but society the family."⁷ When Engels wrote The Origin of the Family in 1884, Marx had already died. Engels was thus reliant on Marx's unstructured notes and Morgan's text itself. Equally, other sources were limited, since anthropology and ethnography as academic disciplines were in their infancy and little fieldwork or research was available.

Gender and Modes of Production

Engels described that it was the transition to class society that led to the oppression of women.

Engels's main thesis in The Origin of the Family is that the family, and women's place therein, is a changing social entity with different forms and relations in different modes of production. Engels drew from Morgan's

⁵ ↪ Janet Sayers, Mary Evans, and Nanneke Redclift, eds., Engels Revisited: Feminist Essays (Oxford: Routledge, 1987).

⁶ ↪ Karl Marx, The Ethnological Notebooks (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974).

⁷ ↪ Marx, Ethnological Notebooks, 18.

findings the fact that in terms of human history, women's oppression is a relatively recent phenomenon. In earlier communal, band societies, in which the household operated within a collective gens grouping, both sexes worked in cooperation to produce the goods necessary for their survival. Women's indispensability to communistic production meant women were invested with decision-making powers for the whole community.

Engels described, more straightforwardly than Morgan, that it was the transition to class society that brought about the oppression of women. The change from gens-based hunter-gatherer societies to the development of agriculture—what would be identified today as part of the transition from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic era, in which food gathering was replaced by food production—occurred intermittently over a long period of time. The domination of new forms of production (including the increasing domestication of animals and the use of the plow) coincided with the institution of the patriarchal household and the male line of descent. The development of class societies depended on the growth in trade in goods and in the development of a surplus over and above what was required for daily subsistence. Household management became cut off from the new sources of wealth, lost its public character, and became a private service that excluded women from social production. The sexual division of labour now took on a gender-antagonistic form in which women lost their previous social status. For Engels, this represented the “world historical defeat of the female sex.”⁸

Historical Materialism

Neither Marx nor Engels were anthropologists; rather, they drew on contemporary anthropological theories to develop a historical-materialist approach to human history. Marx and Engels had both praised Darwin's discoveries for providing a broader environmental dimension to the development of human societies and of human relations with nature and to each other. Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks* made use of Morgan's findings to critique contemporary British anthropologists whose work conceived of the family and private property as separate from material or economic factors.

Marx and Engels's interest in ancient and precapitalist societies lay in their social form, in which labour was “part of life,” rather than something separate from the labourer. In *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Engels argued that “the great moving power of all historic events” lay “in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange.”⁹ Morgan's work provided evidence that men have not always dominated in society and that, for most of human history going back 130,000 years, societies were egalitarian, generally matrilineal, and based on cooperation—in other words, the very opposite of the divisive individualism and gender inequality of capitalism.

Family Household Types and Modes of Subsistence

Engels followed Morgan's stages of the family, stages which correspond historically to different modes of subsistence. The “consanguine” family with marriages separated through generations rather than blood ties predominated in food gathering societies. The “punaluan” family (from *punalua* in Hawaiian, meaning “intimate companion”), with its wider family structure, was generally matrilineal and widespread in food production societies. The “pairing” family, Morgan argued, was to be found in the clan organisation of agricultural peoples, in which respected elders and the lineages of grandparents, parents, and children functioned together. Morgan's categories based on kinship and marriage can be misleading, as they fuse biological and social forces. Morgan's conclusions also derived from observation of surviving hunter-gatherer societies in his day, the structure of which may not have been the same as societies one hundred to ten

⁸ ↪ Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, ed. Eleanor Burke Leacock (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 120.

⁹ ↪ Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, trans. Edward Aveling (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co., 1910), 23.

thousand years earlier. Furthermore, the transition to class societies and the loss of women's higher social status was a long, drawn-out affair. When relying on comparative ethnographic snapshots of societies at any one time, it is difficult to be entirely sure, as anthropologist Karen Sacks points out, of how exactly and with what changes this transition occurred.¹⁰

For Engels, it was the development of agriculture, cattle breeding, metal working, and weaving, together with the development of trade and commodification of goods, that resulted in unequal control over resources. Despite what his critics assert, Engels's argument was not that the introduction of patriarchal structures was the outcome of technological developments alone. As evidenced by use of the plow in more intensive agriculture at the end of the Neolithic era, these developments played a part and tended to exclude women, especially in the later stages of pregnancy or after childbirth. However, Engels made the case that where the earlier sexual division of labour had not resulted in social inequality, now it did—mainly because female household labour was cut off from the sources of surplus production. The creation of surplus by a minority was the crucial social development that underpinned systematic subjugation by class and gender.

Eleanor Burke Leacock, drawing on her own anthropological research, connects the creation of surplus to the specialisation of labour for trade and warfare. Competition among lineage groups, within which the individual family as an economic unit begins to take shape, leads to the institutionalisation of “political” functions connected with warfare and property as something separate from “social” functions. Thus occurs the dichotomisation of “public” and “private” spheres and the institutionalisation of male domination.¹¹

Was Engels Wrong to Rely on Morgan?

Engels followed Morgan's schema closely. Maurice Bloch claims that in some passages, Engels appears to be taken over by Morgan.¹² Martha Giménez focuses her criticisms of Engels on his “un-Marxist” over-reliance on Morgan's work. She claims that Engels's use of Morgan's terms—kinship, women, men, family, monogamy, and civilisation—are not helpful for historical-materialist analysis.¹³ As I have mentioned, it is true that Engels's adoption of Morgan's terminology was sometimes misleading. However, Engels's purpose was to demonstrate the material basis of family forms. He adapted Morgan's analysis accordingly. What characterised the communality of gens-based societies, Engels stated in historical-materialist terms, was that “human labour power still does not produce any considerable surplus over and above its maintenance costs.”¹⁴

Morgan was a social evolutionist. He believed that human societies developed through the invention of successively more efficient methods of production and through humans' increasing control of nature. Morgan's social evolutionism expressed a view of progress in history that drew a straight line to modern Western societies, which appeared to favor some civilisations over others.¹⁵ Morgan's application of evolving gens society to ancient Greek societies greatly

¹⁰ ↪ Sacks stresses that class formation was an uneven process full of geographical differences. See Karen Sacks, *Sisters and Wives: The Past and Future of Sexual Equality* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

¹¹ ↪ Eleanor Burke Leacock, “Women's Status in Egalitarian Society: Implications for Social Evolution,” *Current Anthropology* 19, no. 2: 235–32, 255.

¹² ↪ Maurice Bloch, *Marxism and Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford Univer

¹³ ↪ Martha Giménez, “Marxist and Non-Marxist Elements in Engels's Views on the Oppression of Women” in *Engels Revisited*, 42.

¹⁴ ↪ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 118.

¹⁵ ↪ For example, Lewis Morgan in *Ancient Society* talks about why “some tribes have been left behind in the race of progress.” He makes no mention of colonialism as such. See Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilisation* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1887), 3.

compressed this development, stressing property and the growth of cities over the development of class relations, including slavery, and ignored similar developments some three thousand years before in the Ancient East.¹⁶ However Morgan's work provided evidence for the link between the status of women in society and social production and, despite claims by some to the contrary, there was no difference between Marx and Engels on this.¹⁷ Marx in his *Ethnographical Notebooks* repeated approvingly Morgan's claim that once humanity has overcome the distortion of the career of property, the position of women could be restored to its higher place.¹⁸ Engels in *The Origin of the Family* reached the same conclusion.

It is also wrong to dismiss Morgan simply as a racist. None of the prevailing nineteenth-century racism toward Indigenous peoples was evident in his works. He was strongly critical of the unmanageable power that property had become in the modern world and, for him, the Indigenous North American peoples possessed social qualities far superior to those of the society of his day. He saw these as a model for the future, for a "revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient gentes." Engels chose these words to conclude *The Origin of the Family*.

Leacock goes further, arguing that Morgan's "rudimentary materialism" was infinitely preferable to what came later in U.S. anthropology: cultural relativism.¹⁹ A recent sophisticated version of this can be found in David Graeber and David Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything*. Graeber and Wengrow are neither of the opinion that early food gathering societies were more gender equal, nor that they constituted primitive communist social formations.²⁰ They question whether gender power relations have ever been different, since it depends on individual perspectives.²¹ Their relativist approach excludes a materialist explanation, sees power as arbitrary and inexplicable, and views early human societies through a present-day, individualist lens. The whole point of Morgan's findings, which inspired Engels, was that social being, customs, and relations in early societies were entirely different from our own because their social labour, organisation, and ways of thinking were radically different. Engels's account may have been too historically compressed, but it developed Morgan's broad-brush materialism into a rounded historical one.

The importance of this breakthrough cannot be underestimated. It marked the first Marxist attempt to grasp historically the overlap of social and gender relations. By illuminating the status of women in pre-class societies, it freed understandings about women in society from what Sacks calls "sexist blinders" and pitched women's oppression as a problem of history, rather than one of biology.²² It opened a way to new ways of thinking about women's status in society. As Rosalind Delmar succinctly puts it, if oppression was something for historical materialism to analyse, then it is also something for revolutionary politics to solve.²³

¹⁶ ↪ Eleanor Burke Leacock, *Myths of Male Dominance* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981), 115–19.

¹⁷ ↪ Heather A. Brown is of the opinion that Engels relied on Morgan much more than Marx (see Brown, *Marx and Gender*, 134–38)—a mistaken assessment, as I point out.

¹⁸ ↪ Marx, *Ethnological Notebooks*, 14.

¹⁹ ↪ The "culture of poverty" theory in the 1970s emerged from this way of thinking, holding that ethnic or social "culture" are the main obstacles to upward social mobility. See Eleanor Burke Leacock, "Individuals and Society in Anthropological Theory," *Dialectical Anthropology* 10, no. 1/2 (1985): 69–91.

²⁰ ↪ See Chris Knight, Nancy Lindsfarne, and Jonathan Neale's review of Graeber and Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything*: "'The Dawn of Everything' Gets Human History Wrong," *MR Online*, December 17, 2021.

²¹ ↪ David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), 47, 74.

²² ↪ Sacks, *Sisters and Wives*, 243.

²³ ↪ Rosalind Delmar, "Looking Again at Engels's *Origin of the Family*" in *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, eds. J. Mitchell and A. Oakley (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 287.

The State-Family Nexus

Engels drew together the social roles of the state and the patriarchal family, making the case that both were superstructures that came into existence in response to the division of societies into classes. He followed Morgan in highlighting the connection between slavery and forms of domination in the family in classical, so-called civilised society, in which slaves were often classed alongside women and children.²⁴ Class societies in Ancient Greece required “an institution of public force” that could keep people enslaved and in check. States were instruments of the exploiting classes. States appeared to stand above social conflict, yet they provided a legal and armed apparatus on behalf of the exploiting class.²⁵ Similarly, the monogamous or patriarchal family, while appearing to be universal and part of human nature, is a product of history, even of class conflict. Engels identified the family as being the “central link” for imposing legal property rights.²⁶

Engels’s treatment of the family in capitalist societies focused on how it institutionalises domestic labour as a private service that further entrenched women’s oppression. Engels explained:

“With the patriarchal family and still more with the single monogamous family...[h]ousehold management lost its public character. It no longer concerned society. It became a private service; the wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production.”²⁷ “The modern individual family,” he wrote, “is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife, and modern society is a mass composed of these individual families as its molecules.”²⁸

Engels also showed that the family in capitalism—despite the universal, undifferentiated ideology wrapped around it—fundamentally differs according to social class. The bourgeois family was primarily a means of consolidating and passing on property and wealth. It was steeped in hypocrisy: it publicly displayed monogamy, but for men, this was seldom true. Engels called out the oppressive effects of bourgeois, idealised versions of the family and the long moral shadow they cast across all society.²⁹ The working-class family, by contrast, was cut off from the means of production and generally propertyless; often, all of its members were forced into waged work. This made the relationships in it very different from those of the bourgeois family and, Engels argued, held the potential for freer, less socially conditioned relationships within it.³⁰

Engels saw that a step toward freeing women from the isolation of the privatised home was their participation in paid labour, even if this occurred under the harsh conditions of capitalist exploitation. It opened a crack in the ultra-individualised patriarchal family.³¹ Engels also mentioned the potential of the development of large-scale industry and technological advances to alleviate the intensity of domestic labour. Running through *The Origin of the Family* is a deep

²⁴ ↩ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 121.

²⁵ ↩ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 228–29.

²⁶ ↩ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 235.

²⁷ ↩ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 137.

²⁸ ↩ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 137; see also 223.

²⁹ ↩ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 145.

³⁰ ↩ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 135.

³¹ ↩ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 137–38.

awareness of the possibility of the liberation of women through changed social circumstances and through the breaking down of socially inherited gender stereotypes.

But to uproot the confining and oppressive conditions of the capitalist family, Engels argued, required the transferral of the means of production into common ownership and a new social organisation that was not driven by capital accumulation and class exploitation. Only then could private housekeeping and the care of children, currently undertaken within the individual capitalist family, have the potential to become “a public affair”—that is, provided on a social basis.³² Engels saw the beginnings of this change in working-class struggles against the capitalist system, a process that had within it the means to both abolish exploitation and loosen the chains of oppression.³³

The family-state nexus that Engels drew attention to has remained central to capitalist societies today. One might argue that states rely on families to an even greater degree to set the parameters for social reproduction than they did in Engels’s time. States, either formally or informally, continue to both regulate and rely on the family. Family law constitutes a large part of states’ legal systems. Even the European Union can legislate on family law if there are crossborder implications. Every nation-state, regardless of ethos or religious leanings, filters taxation, property, and inheritance laws, as well as welfare payments through the family. While social developments have undermined the conformity and permanency of marriage, the conventional notions of marriage and family remain vital to property and other rights. Added to this, in recent times, neoliberal states have come to rely even more on the family to fill the gap of public service provision.

The capitalist state, as Engels foresaw, will always protect the private family. The U.S. Constitution does not mention the family, but the U.S. Supreme Court, as we have seen recently, rules on abortion; it also rules on marriage, contraception, mental illness in family members; the right of police to search a home; and many other things related to family life. Family historian Stephanie Coontz points out that U.S. state intervention revolves around creating a sharp delineation of the “normal” family as a private, autonomous, and self-supporting institution. The subjugation of families to public authority stemmed from an attempt “to build individualistic definitions of private responsibility...that [were] especially geared to a competitive and structurally inequal social order.” Furthermore, she writes that U.S. welfare policies work based on a strong commitment to the nuclear family and to female domesticity. The idea that there is some primordial family privacy is a myth, she argues, not least because the family does not exist as an autonomous, private unit. “The strong nuclear family,” she continues, “is in large measure a creation of the strong state.”³⁴

A tight family-state overlap can be vital for weaker, newly established states. For example, the 1937 Irish Constitution laid down in Southern Ireland after the British had been expelled specified that the new, fragile state was going to be a Catholic State for a Catholic people, in which “women’s work” would be subsumed into what was good for society. The family figured large. It stated that through a woman’s life in the home, she gave to the state “a support without which the common good could not be achieved” and that “mothers” should not take on paid work to the neglect of their duties in the home.³⁵ In the case of Ireland, such pronouncements underpinned a refusal to provide a fully publicly funded welfare state.

³² ↩ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 139.

³³ ↩ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 145.

³⁴ ↩ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 171, 189.

³⁵ ↩ The Irish Constitution, Article 41.2.

The Bourgeois Family and Oppression

Engels argued that the monogamous family model serves the interests of the bourgeoisie. As Marx and Engels declared in *The Communist Manifesto*, the family, for the possessing classes, when all sentimentality is stripped away, is “a mere money relation.”³⁶ Engels developed this further. Based on the supremacy of the man and monogamy, the bourgeois family has the express purpose of establishing undisputed paternity. It is the legal vehicle for passing on property and capital to family members and, by the same token, a further means to amass wealth and prevent wealth distribution.

Engels, while underlining the family’s economic basis, expanded on its ideological dimension. It is here that Engels was at his most evocative. The bourgeois family appears as “a free contract,” but, in a society in which everything is a commodity, the notion of “free” and “equal” in the relationship of marriage is a veil over the material interests that drive it and the oppressive power relations within it.³⁷ For all of its wealth and privilege, the bourgeois family also harbours cruel oppression. Marx and Engels had already commented on the stultifying environment of the bourgeois family, which covers the “latent slavery” of women.³⁸ *The Origin of the Family* repeats this theme, describing the family as “founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife.”³⁹ Further, Engels pinpointed the hypocrisy and gender oppression of the capitalist family. Husbands can have sexual freedom, but for women, it is considered a crime. Engels saw the accepted power of the man in bourgeois marriages as an extension of his economic supremacy.⁴⁰ The capitalist construction of the family legitimises male authority as social common sense “without any need for special legal titles and privileges.” Later, he added, “the peculiar character of the supremacy of the husband over the wife” arose from capitalism itself and can only be dismantled when “the characteristic of the monogamous family as the economic unit of society” is also abolished.⁴¹

The Working-Class Family and Gender Roles

Working-class family life, as Engels was very much aware, was starkly different from that of the propertied classes. Bourgeois morality about the sacredness of the family certainly did not extend to the families of the working class.⁴² In *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Engels, quoting from doctors’ testimonies to the Factories Inquiry Commission in the early 1840s, described how children as young as 6 years old were torn away from their homes and placed into factories and mills, resulting in permanent physical disabilities and sometimes even death, an inhuman practice that constituted “social murder.”⁴³ Furthermore, the mass recruitment of all able-bodied adults into industry left the care of younger children to chance. When the parents both spent twelve or thirteen hours each day in the mill, babies and toddlers were sometimes put into the care of nurses for a small sum, but were mainly treated like “wild weeds,” left to fend for themselves.⁴⁴

³⁶ ↪ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974), 111.

³⁷ ↪ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 142–43.

³⁸ ↪ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 44.

³⁹ ↪ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 137.

⁴⁰ ↪ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 145.

⁴¹ ↪ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 137–38.

⁴² ↪ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 123–24.

⁴³ ↪ Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (London: Panther Books, 1984), 126.

⁴⁴ ↪ Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class*, 171. See also Paul Cammack, “Marx on Social Reproduction,” *Historical Materialism* 28, no. 2 (2020): 1–31.

Female and child labour in industry upended people's lives and created new pressures, particularly for women. Engels observed that only "the coming of modern large-scale industry was the road to social production open to [women] again—and then only to the proletarian wife. But it was opened in such a manner that, if she carries out her duties in the private service of her family, she remains excluded from public production and unable to earn [wages]; and if she wants to take part in public production and earn [her living] independently, she cannot carry out her family duties."⁴⁵ The phrase "family duties" grates on us, but the substantial point Engels was making is that there is a fundamental conflict between paid and unpaid labour, both of which, through the establishment of the individualised family, capitalism demands women to perform.

Engels also highlighted how the experience of mass waged labour for women challenged existing ideas about defined gender roles within the family. During waves of male unemployment, women became the main wage-earners for the family, and men were often left at home. He described how working men found themselves spending the day in damp, poor accommodation, mending clothes and socks for the family or preparing meals for when their wives and children returned home, exhausted from the factory.⁴⁶ This became "a world turned upside down" regarding accepted ideas about men and women. He wrote that "If the reign of the wife of the husband, as inevitably brought about by the factory system, is inhuman, the pristine rule of the husband over the wife must have been inhuman too." The social construction of gender did not escape Engels. He went on: "we must admit that so total a reversal of the position of the sexes can have come to pass only because the sexes have been placed in a false position from the beginning."⁴⁷

Engels's shrewd observations about social variability of gender roles undo notions that Engels was mechanically economic. Engels was faulted by Shulamith Firestone for building a theory around an "economic construct" that excluded gender.⁴⁸ Engels is accused of being gender-biased when it came to domestic labour, and, according to Holly Lewis, guilty of "oppositional sexism," which "limits his analysis."⁴⁹ These criticisms, it seems to me, fail to make a distinction between language use, which is influenced by the idiom of the historical moment, and analysis. As I have shown, it is simply not true to say that Engels was oblivious to the social construction of gender roles. However, it is true that Engels was writing in an idiom that bore the marks of the accepted views of men and women at the time, including predefined gender roles. He wrote that when male workers are left unemployed at home, domestic work "desexes" them, and that for women to be working many hours in the factory takes away from the woman "all womanliness."⁵⁰ However, the substantive point he was making was that exploitation in industrial capitalism puts workers, male and female, in humiliating positions, and drawing on the gender-biased language of his time, he expressed this clumsily. Language and new ideas can clash, and Engels, in the thick of huge social changes around him, was not impervious to this linguistic lag. We can hardly expect Engels to speak the language of consistent nonbinary antisexism that we use today.

⁴⁵ ↪ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 137.

⁴⁶ ↪ Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class*, 173.

⁴⁷ ↪ Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class*, 174.

⁴⁸ ↪ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015), 15. Firestone does not fully theorize the sex-class category, although it is a term taken up by other radical feminists—for example, Christine Delphy.

⁴⁹ ↪ Holly Lewis, *The Politics of Everybody: Feminism, Queer Theory, and Marxism at the Intersection* (London: Zed

⁵⁰ ↪ Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class*, 174.

Engels and Social Reproduction

A more substantial criticism of Engels from Marxist feminists is that he failed to describe the structural articulation in historical-materialist terms between the mode of production and the mode of human reproduction. Here, a weakness in Engels's account needs to be mentioned. Engels did not fully locate the function of the working-class family in capitalism, mainly because he did not explore in detail the political economy of the process. He appreciated the significance of the separation of the individual household from society and how this lay at the root of gender oppression in capitalism. He called for a social revolution in which the individualised family would cease to be "the economic unit of society," and in which private housekeeping would be transformed into a comprehensive social activity, and the care and education of children would be a public affair. However, he did not fully explain from a wage-labour perspective how in capitalism, the working-class family was stuck in this isolation.

Marx laid this out much more fully. In exploring the notion of simple reproduction, he distinguished between labour in the factory—what he termed productive consumption—and individualised labour in the home, or individual consumption. Unlike in earlier modes of production, the labouring population in capitalism no longer produces for itself the goods it needs, nor has access to them via direct exchange of its own products. Its maintenance and reproduction depend wholly on the sale of its labour, and workers use the money paid to them for this labour power to buy the means of subsistence.⁵¹ The historical dimension of this was also important, as Antonella Picchio perceptively notes: "when labour became waged labour," it followed that "the work of reproduction—care and work in the home—became unwaged labour."⁵² Engels rightly insisted that capitalism brought with it the separation of the household from the public sphere, and commodity production came to dominate all aspects of social life, including the family. However, he did not develop in *The Origin of the Family* the economic tie between waged and unwaged labour with the same detail that Marx provided. This explains, in part, Engels's mistaken predictions for what would happen to the working-class family.

The Disappearance of the Working-Class Family?

Engels's focus in *The Origin of the Family* was on the bourgeois family based on property, inheritance, and wealth. The working-class family, in comparison, seemed to him to be in flux from the upheaval of widespread industrialisation and to be shedding any material basis. Engels implied that working-class family life was freer, including in sexual relationships, because it is outside the strictures of bourgeois life. However, as things turned out, the disruption to the family instigated by industrialisation was only a temporary phenomenon. Engels did not foresee how capitalism would draw on the working-class family to stabilise labour supply. Rapid industrialisation, which sucked women and children into wage labour, may have had short-term benefits for capital, but in the long term was inviable. Child mortality and injury levels soared; female illness and early deaths proliferated. Immigration—particularly from Britain's famine-torn colony, Ireland—could make up for the diminishing supply of labour, but, in the long term, a more stable means of the social reproduction of the labour force was required.

This was what the Factory Acts of mid-Victorian Britain attempted to do. By introducing protective measures for pregnant women and banning very young child labour, they effectively set the conditions for the reconstitution of the working-class family, which would deliver on an individualised basis a steady stream of workers today—fed and refreshed daily—and new workers tomorrow. The birth of the modern nuclear family model, in other words, was at the behest of the

⁵¹ ↪ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1976), 717.

⁵² ↪ Antonella Picchio, *Social Reproduction: The Political Economy of the Labour Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

needs of capital accumulation. Male workers were reinvented as breadwinners, women as homemakers, and childhood reimagined to become an extended period of care and education. As industrialisation developed into the twentieth century, a longer living, more skilled, and increasingly productive labour force became the priority, and the patriarchal, 2.4 children model of the family was to ensure the smooth delivery of these new labour needs.⁵³

Engels underestimated how both capital and labour would draw on the family in different ways and with different interests. From the point of view of the ruling class, this family structure contributed to greater stability in terms of labour supply. From the point of view of the working class, the family wage seemed an improvement on women and children working themselves to death in factories. In the case of Britain, the material gains of British imperialism, coupled with later booms in the economy, gave plausibility to the model of the male-earner family as male wages rose. However, ideology outstripped reality in so far as the fact that, for most working-class families, there was no choice but for women to continue in paid employment to make ends meet. The male breadwinner model also came at a very heavy cost to women. It reinforced notions about the cult of “true womanhood” and a woman’s place in the home; it demeaned domestic labour and normalised sexist ideas about “women’s” work.

This view was shockingly pervasive, even among sections of the labour movement at the time. In Ireland, for example, the trade union leadership went further and supported legislation in the 1930s prohibiting the employment of women in industry when women’s health and safety was no longer even an issue. This was an extreme case of how divisive and damaging to the working class the capitalist ideology of the family could be, a development that Engels’s analysis did not entirely foresee.

Did Engels Equalise Reproduction and Production?

A further area of contention in Engels’s work that sometimes comes in for sharp criticism from Marxist feminists is his understanding of the relationship of production (of commodities) and reproduction (of people). The passage that has given rise to this contention lies in the preface to the first edition of *The Origin of the Family*, where Engels wrote:

*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...[and] on the other side, the propagation human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organisation 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 labour on the one hand and of the family on the other.*⁵⁴

The twofold nature of production and reproduction to which Engels was referring here is based on the historical-materialist premise that “humans must be in a position to live to make history,” which depends on having the wherewithal to subsist and the ability to reproduce themselves. These were not two different stages, but a combined reality in early societies, with both processes vital to survival. Just after the passage above, Engels went on to say that as the production of the means of subsistence develops, it increasingly predominates over the production of life. Certainly, what emerges overall from *The Origin of the Family* is that changes in family structures were determined by the changing nature of production, rather than parallel developments.

⁵³ ↩ For a full account of this process, see L. German, *Sex, Class and Socialism* (London: Bookmarks, 1992), 15–42.

⁵⁴ ↩ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 71–72.

Some in the socialist feminist currents of the 1970s interpreted Engels's preface as justification for a two-systems theory of women's oppression: the mode of production on the one hand, and domestic labour on the other, one arising from capitalism and the other from patriarchy. The dual theory interpretation often was taken to mean that women's oppression operates relatively autonomously from capitalist exploitation.⁵⁵

As Vogel and others have argued, this "two modes" theory is problematic. To identify gender oppression as arising from a socially distinct, relatively autonomous, and often ill-defined patriarchal power within capitalism represents, as Vogel contends, "a mysterious co-existence of disjunct explanations of social development."⁵⁶ Patriarchy is sometimes understood as an ideology, sometimes as a gender-oppressive norm, and sometimes as a social structure, but its precise origins are not explained. It also tends to rest on essentialist binary thinking about gender, which fixes men and women into the biological sex assigned to them at birth.

Yet, to impute Engels with holding a "two modes" view is particularly perverse, because his overall thesis was that reproduction cannot be seen in isolation from other social processes. The existing mode of production affects all social relations, including those of gender. Men do not have a more powerful position, which, independent of social determinants, they have had the foresight to use to shape society in a patriarchal direction. Rather, as Giménez puts it, "men like women are social beings whose characteristics reflect the social formation within which they emerge as social agents."⁵⁷

Engels and Women in Paid Work

It is often held that Engels was "economically reductive" for believing that women entering (or re-entering) paid work would lead to their liberation.⁵⁸ Engels saw women entering wage work as a first step in the struggle against gender oppression, not in itself as the means to end it. In fact, he described women in "public industry" as "the first condition for the liberation of the wife"; something that undermines the monogamous family and raises the possibility of its abolition as the economic unit of society.⁵⁹ Engels was only too aware of the harsh conditions under which women were being drawn into the factories, as well as the extreme exploitation and suffering to which they were subjected. However, Engels also observed how the mass entry of women into paid work overturned existing family norms and gender stereotypes. It changed how women thought of themselves, broke down some of the public-private divide instituted by the family, and brought women into a wider social arena that gave them greater social agency. The "comradeship and social action...self-respect, self-reliance and courage, that factory life involved" were in stark contrast to the "cribbed, cabined and confined" atmosphere of the home, as one historian of the time described the social change that this involved.⁶⁰ Notwithstanding the brutal conditions of the mines and mills, women entering "public industry," Engels noted, went beyond "formal legal equality rights" because this work opened a way to collective resistance and organising.⁶¹

⁵⁵ ↪ Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, 22.

⁵⁶ ↪ Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, 28–29.

⁵⁷ ↪ Martha Giménez, *Marx, Women, and Capitalist Social Reproduction* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2018), 347.

⁵⁸ ↪ See, for example, Sayers, Evan, and Redclift, *Engels Revisited*, among other collections of essays on Engels.

⁵⁹ ↪ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 137–38.

⁶⁰ ↪ Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution* (London: Virago Press, 2018), 308.

⁶¹ ↪ Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 137.

Engels's recognition of the social significance of women (re-)joining the ranks of wage earners resonates in our time as women continue to join the workforce in historically high numbers. Across the globe, women's employment is at a record high. Where I live, in Ireland, we have seen the numbers of women in the workforce jump upward by more than one-fifth in the last thirty years. This expanding female and racially diverse workforce—including in the category of “essential workers” in health, retail, and education, starkly visible since the onset of the COVID pandemic—now make up the modern service proletariat. In the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, this has resulted in a rise in industrial struggles and in the care and service sectors in which women work. In Latin America, this has encouraged large social movements for gender rights. In the Global North, women, now making up nearly half of the working class, have greater clout and renewed social power. The growing number of women in paid work also brings to the fore the contradiction at the heart of the capitalist family—that capital requires both more workers, including women, but does this in the absence of any extra social support for care and domestic work. This deep, irresolvable contradiction is clearly observable in recent mobilisations in the United Kingdom and Ireland over inadequate child care provision.

The entry of women into the workforce, coupled with the social crisis of housing, continues to disrupt older models of the family. The patriarchal, heteronormative nuclear family in the Global North is in decline. In the United Kingdom, 15.4 percent of families are now single-parent families; 25 percent of families in London are one-person households, and 28 percent of those aged 20 to 34 years are living with their parents.⁶² Across the European Union, for both men and women, the proportion of single-adult households increased faster than that of adults living as couples.⁶³ In the United States, one-person households and female householders with no spouse make up just over 46 percent of all household types.⁶⁴ In other words, in many parts of the Global North, families (in the traditional, nuclear sense) are undergoing change, and diverse living arrangements are the norm. This is not an inevitable development, and there are vigorous attempts from the conservative far right in different countries to reverse it. Nevertheless, the accumulated growth of women in paid work, as Engels foresaw, alongside the many social crises of capitalism today, have added to the unravelling of old gender norms and led to changed political expectations around families and traditional gender roles.

Engels and Privatised Care Today

As we have seen, a distinctive feature of Engels's analysis was that gender oppression is marked by class. In our times, in the long shadow of an ever-widening wealth gap, the fault line of class within gender has become more obvious. Within the gender pay gap, there are also those of class and race. For low-paid women workers, the double burden of paid and unpaid work bears down heavily. For middle- and upper-class women in Western societies, unpaid domestic work can be outsourced (at a price), enabling them to pursue equality in professions and higher paid jobs. These professional career women—some of whom now occupy key positions in the running of capitalism—inhabit another world than that of their working-class sisters, who are stuck in low-paid jobs that are often part-time, because they need to juggle paid and unpaid work. In the early twentieth century, many socialist women drew on Engels to argue for a working-class women's movement for social change, one which had different political objectives to the liberal feminist movements of their day. In the twenty-first century, a similar political fissure has emerged: a new radical socialist and Marxist-feminist current within feminism has found its voice, one firmly positioned against mainstream neoliberal feminism.

⁶² ↪ Office for National Statistics, “Families and Households in the UK: 2021,” March 9, 2022, ons.gov.uk.

⁶³ ↪ Eurostat, “Household Composition Statistics: Increasing Number of Households Composed of Adults Living Alone,” Eurostat: Statistics Explained, updated June 2023, europa.eu.

⁶⁴ ↪ Finances Online, “Number of US Households in 2024: Demographics, Statistics, and Trends,” fi

Nevertheless, those who speak and write in the name of Marxist feminism are often at odds with Engels concerning the relationship of social reproduction within the capitalist system. For example, Giménez, a structuralist Marxist, is critical of what she calls Engels's "over-historicism," and emphasizes instead that structures of social reproduction articulate with the other structures of capitalism, particularly production, and that this combined structural articulation determines the overall system.⁶⁵

Engels's historical materialism laid out a different social dynamic. He saw family forms changing according to the needs of modes of production, in an analysis that was indeed deeply historical. His identification of the family in capitalism—along with the state, legal, and political systems—as part of the superstructures of capitalist society specified how these superstructures relate and interact with the economic foundation of society. Counter to a commonly held view, Engels did not see economic relations as mechanically determining everything; rather, he saw that superstructural elements also "exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles" in a way that is undeniably reciprocal.⁶⁶

The value of the superstructure-base description in relation to the family and other social-reproduction systems is that it allows for an important differentiation: that the capitalist state, social structures, and social consciousness are subject to constant change, whereas the capitalist mode of production, outside revolutions, forms the relatively stable basis of a social order at any one time.⁶⁷ In regard to social reproduction, this enables us to grasp the ever-changing character of its different components—not only the people care that takes place in the home, but also health, education, and welfare systems—including their gendered nature, which is shaped by, and at times comes into conflict with, the labour needs of capital accumulation.

This social dynamic can be sidelined in overly structuralist accounts of social reproduction, which sometimes seek to "recenter" social reproduction systems (as we know them now) as an essential, stable category of the capitalist economic system. Some emphasise that human labour is "an essence category" of capitalism, rather than one that is always in mutation and is defined in relation to the mutations of capital itself.⁶⁸

Social reproduction in the home has seen substantial changes in recent times, precisely as it responds to changes in capitalism. Ever-greater numbers of women in paid work, alongside political contestation of the patriarchal order, have contributed to increased diversity in household composition and a strong trend away from the heteronormative nuclear family. The evolving changes to household composition have occurred mainly due to different female employment patterns, which themselves respond to capital's need for an ever-expanding labour supply. The result has been a strong trend—particularly in the Global North—away from the heteronormative nuclear family, itself a product of a different era of capitalism.

Engels in his time was only too aware of the social upheavals for working-class families that were wrought by rapid industrialisation in the cities of nineteenth-century Britain. Today, too, individual homes and families are on the frontline of the rocketing cost of living and other social pressures that threaten their daily survival and health. Homes have had to accommodate more people as adult children, unable to find affordable housing, stay longer in their parents' homes.

⁶⁵ ↪ For the influence of Louis Althusser on Giménez, see Andrew Ryder, "Ideology and Social Reproduction of Gender: The Reading of Althusser in Lise Vogel and Judith Butler," paper presented at "Women's Emancipation and Human Emancipation: New Approaches to an Old Question" conference, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, November 12, 2015.

⁶⁶ ↪ Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), 487–89.

⁶⁷ ↪ For elaboration of this point see Chris Harman, "Base and Superstructure," *International Socialism* 2, no. 32 (1986): 3–44.

⁶⁸ ↪ Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory*, 19.

Other families have been torn apart through migration, climate change, and wars. Meanwhile, capitalism refuses to provide even modest advances in publicly provided child and elder care. Care is left more and more to individual private homes to provide. Social reproduction on this increasingly individualised and private basis is social reproduction on the cheap, but it has reached what rightly has been termed by Nancy Fraser “a crisis point.”⁶⁹ Engels’s insights into the family’s role in capitalism, the oppression of the private sphere, and how nothing less than a social revolution is required to truly socialise it, makes Engels very much for our times.

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⁶⁹ ↩ Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet and What We Can Do About It* (London: Verso, 2022).

❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.

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