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Author(s): Paresh Chattopadhyay

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Marx on Women's Question

PARESH CHATTOPADHYAY

The paper by Jinee Lokaneeta on 'Alexandra Kollontai and Marxist Feminism' (*EPW*, April 28) is an admirable attempt to critically recall and put in proper perspective the great role played by the eminent Russian revolutionary and feminist in the emancipatory movement of the worker and of women in particular in Russia in the early part of the 20th century. She has also rightly (often too mildly) criticised the most unenviable record of the 'really (non)existing socialist' regimes regarding the situation of women in their societies which remained essentially patriarchal till the end. At the same time the author has raised theoretical questions. At the level of theory, echoing the general body of feminists, she has criticised what she variously calls 'Marxist tradition', 'Marxist analysis', 'Marxist theory' or, in short, 'Marxists', basically on two scores:

(i) Issues relating to 'sexuality, marriage, family' have often been considered as 'secondary issues to be addressed only after the transformation of economic structures.' In the 'early Marxist theory', as represented by 'Engels, Marx and Bebel', the "so-called private domains, often the primary sites of women's oppression, remained unaddressed" (p 1409).

(ii) 'Marxists', represented by Marx (alone this time), have 'devalued and delegitimised' women's 'domestic labour' by defining productive labour as that labour which has exchange value (not use value) and produces surplus value (p 1410).

As one can see in the first criticism which has the character of generality, the author amalgamates 'Engels, Marx and Bebel' in the same category advocating the 'early Marxist theory', while in the second, which is very specific, she singles out Marx being the author of the particular idea, though, towards the end of the relevant paragraph she mentions 'Marxists' in general (obviously including Marx) subscribing to the idea.

The first point which we would like to emphasise here is that on the women's question in general – as in so many others, particularly those directly concerning human emancipation – there is an unbridgeable gap between Marx and what

the great revolutionary and feminist Raya Dunayevskaya has called, the 'post-Marx Marxists' (including, first of all, the leaders of the Second and the Third Internationals). Once we separate Marx from (particularly the official) 'Marxists', a whole new continent of thought – to paraphrase Dunayevskaya again – stands before us. Then it appears that the criticisms mentioned above, while on the whole rightly directed against the 'Marxists', manifest, on the contrary, very superficial and uninformed criticisms of Marx's position on the women's question. In what follows I argue this point exclusively on the basis of Marx's own texts from different periods (translations from Marx's non-English texts are mine).¹ The two following sections deal successively with the two criticisms under discussion.

I Marx on Women

Right from his early years Marx discussed the women's question as an issue as such from an emancipatory point of view. In his third Parisian manuscript of 1844 Marx, after remarking that in the capitalist society 'marriage' is surely a form of 'exclusive private property' (for man), goes on to affirm that in the behaviour towards women "as the prey and servant of the social lust (*Wollust*), is expressed the infinite degradation in regard to himself. The immediate, natural, necessary relation of the human to the human is the behaviour of man to the woman. In this is shown to what extent the natural behaviour of man has become human... From this behaviour one can judge the whole stage of human development" (1966: 98, 99; emphasis in the text). One year later, after qualifying the 'general situation of the woman in today's society' as 'inhuman', Marx admiringly refers to Fourier's 'masterly characterisation' of marriage in connection with which Fourier had emphasised that "the degree of the female emancipation is the natural measure of the universal emancipation" [Marx 1972:207, 208]. In the immediately succeeding work Marx finds "the first form of the germ of unequal distribution – quantitatively and qualitatively – of labour and property" in the "family where

the women and children are man's slaves" (1973:32; emphasis in the text).

About two decades later, in the 'detached footnotes' (1863-1865) Marx wrote that under the form of private property based on the expropriation of the immediate producers from the conditions of production "the slavery of the family members by the head of the family – who purely and simply (rein) uses and exploits them – is at least implied" (1988:134; the term 'slavery' is underlined in the manuscript). A little later, in a letter to Kugelmann (December 12, 1868). Marx noted: "Anyone who knows something about history knows also that great social upheavals (*Umwaltungen*) are impossible without the feminine ferment. Social progress is exactly measured by the social status of the beautiful sex (the ugly ones included)." In the same letter he proudly informed his friend that a woman (Mrs Law) had been nominated to the International's highest body – the General Council (1973c:582-83). Marx sent the young Elizabeth Dimitrieva to Paris to organise the women's section of the International. Elizabeth became one of the leading communards and was responsible for lucid socialist formulations on behalf of the 'Union des femmes'. This also shows how much Marx valued the necessity of the existence of women's independent organisation to defend their specific rights.

Towards the end of his life, Marx, as is seen in his excerpts from L H Morgan, continues his 'feminist' position: "The modern family contains in germ not only slavery, but also serfdom...It contains in miniature all the antagonisms which later develop widely in society and its state" (in Krader 1974:120; emphasis in manuscript).

In general, Marx notes that "as soon as property began to be created in masses,...a real foundation of paternal power was laid" and that "change of descent from the female line to the male was pernicious (*schadlich*) for the position and the rights of the woman and the mother." In his excerpt from Henry Maine, Marx refers to the latter's assertion that "all the branches of human society may or may not have been developed from joint families which arose out of an original patriarchal cell." Marx observes that this 'blockheaded Englishman' whose point of departure is the 'patriarch', 'cannot put out of his head English private family after all' [Krader 1974:309]. Marx ridicules Maine's attempt

to 'transport 'patriarchal' Roman family into the very beginning of things', and cites McLennan (whom he otherwise criticises): "Relationship through females is a common custom of savage communities all over the world" [Krader 1974:324, 329].

Three years before his death, in his draft of the programme for the 'Parti Ouvrier Français', Marx proposes the "suppression of all the articles of the Code establishing the inferiority of women in relation to men" and "equality of wage for equal labour for the workers of both sexes." The draft itself of course starts with the preamble: "The emancipation of the producing class is that of all human beings irrespective of sex or race" (1965:1538, 1735). Citations could be easily multiplied.

Far from treating patriarchy as normal and 'natural' as an institution, Marx noted, in his Morgan excerpts, that the patriarchal families, as they evolved among the Hebrews, the Romans and the Greeks constituted an 'exception in human experience', and further noted that the family under the 'paternal power' was characterised by the incorporation of members in servile and dependent relations which was 'unknown before that time' (Krader 1974:119; underlined in manuscript). In his Maine excerpts, commenting on Thomas Strange's affirmation that the "fee of a Hindu wife was anomalous," Marx remarks that "this 'anomaly' is the survival of the old normal rule which was based on descent of gens in the female line...which long ago was transformed into (*ubergegangen*) descent in male line" (Krader 1974:324-25; emphasised in manuscript). It goes without saying that the 'transformation' in question meant also change in sexual division of labour. Paraphrasing and commenting on Morgan, Marx noted that "with the development of the monogamian character of the family the authority of the father increased," and wrote: "The monogamian family must advance as society advances and change as society changes even as it has done in the past. It is the creature of the social system...(It) must be supposable that it is capable of still further improvement until the equality of the sexes is attained" (Krader:124; emphasis in manuscript).

Towards the end of 1840s Marx wrote "one cannot speak of 'the' family. Historically, the bourgeoisie imprints on the family the character of the bourgeois family. To its sordid existence corresponds the holy concept in the official phraseology and general hypocrisy. The existence (*Dasein*) of the family is rendered necessary by its connection with the mode of production,

independently of the will of the bourgeois society" (1973:164; emphasis ours). The *Communist Manifesto* (Section 2) would deride the hypocritical bourgeois discourse on 'family values', inasmuch as the "big industry destroys all family ties for the proletariat and turns women into mere instruments of production." Later, in his master work he wrote: "the big industry by dissolving the foundation of the traditional family (*alten Familienwesens*) and the corresponding family labour has also dissolved the traditional family ties themselves" (1962a: 513; our emphasis). Far from holding the family division of labour as an institution 'fixed' for ever, Marx emphasises that "it is naturally as absurd to hold the Christian-Germanic form of the family as absolute as it is to hold the old Roman, the old Greek or the old Oriental form of the family as absolute." Indeed, capital has become the "radical dissolvant of the hitherto existing worker family" (1962a:514; 1965:994).

Marx underlines how capital was using women's (and children's) labour in special ways to enrich itself. As regards the first, we cited above Marx's statement that capitalist big industry was acting as a 'radical dissolvant' of the working class family and of the corresponding 'domestic labour' (*Familienarbeit*). Indeed, the big industry had taken the working class women (and children of both sexes) out of the household sphere and assigned them to the socially organised (capitalist) process of production (1962a:514). Marx notes that with the introduction of machines, making the use of sheer human muscle power for production superfluous, capital went after women and children and "bent all the members of the family, without distinction of age or sex, under its truncheon." Capital, for its self-valorisation, "confiscated the mother of the family" and "usurped the labour that was necessary for consumption within the family" (1962a:416-417; 1965:939-940, 941). Speaking of the "direct exploitation of women and children who themselves have to earn their wage," Marx writes in an early 1860s manuscript that whereas earlier the man's wage had to be sufficient for the upkeep of the family, now "women and children reproduce not only the equivalent of their consumption, but also a surplus value at the same time" (1982:2024, 2052).

II Abstract vs Concrete Labour

Contrary to the classical (and 'vulgar') political economy, Marx holds that the exchange value producing labour is 'abstract' labour, while the use value producing labour is 'concrete' labour. Far from

denigrating use values and the 'concrete' labour producing them, Marx considers that only the latter kind of labour is 'useful productive activity', and hence is 'real labour' (*reale Arbeit*). That is, the process of producing new use values with (existing) use values by useful (concrete labour) is the 'real labour process' (*wirkliche Arbeitsprozess*) (Marx 1958:49, 56; 1988:57; emphasis in the manuscript).²

It would thus be clear that far from denigrating use values and labour, producing use values – 'real labour' – Marx in fact prized them. So to what extent are Marx's feminist critics is justified in asserting that Marx ignored domestic labour performed by women at home – that is, precisely the labour producing use values, or the 'real labour'? As a general proposition this is simply not true. Fully aware of the gender-division of labour which evolved to the detriment of women and where started the germ of 'unequal distribution of labour and property' involving 'slavery' of women and their 'exploitation' by men (regarding which we cited the relevant texts earlier), Marx obviously did not 'neglect women's labour.' This also comes out clearly in Marx's discussion of changes that capital has wrought on (working class) women's domestic labour. As he emphasises in his different texts, whereas the 'mothers of the family' before they become wage labourers had ordinarily performed the "labour necessary for family consumption," whereas this "domestic labour had economically sustained the family way of life" (where, let us add, the adult male members were already wage labourers), whereas 'the woman worked for the house' and man's wage had to be sufficient to sustain the family (economically), capital has now usurped that 'free labour for family sustenance' by 'confiscating the mothers' and turning them into wage slaves in order to increase the total surplus value from the family (1962a:416; 1965:940, 941; 1982: 2052). Needless to add, in the eyes of Marx, the woman was performing earlier household functions as the 'slave' of the male 'head of the family' (as we saw earlier).

We now come to the question of 'domestic labour' being considered as 'unproductive labour' by Marx. Now, insofar as the labour process results in the production of articles as use values, the labour process, as Marx says, is 'real labour process' involving concrete or 'real labour' (we saw this earlier), and as Marx emphasises, "the labour itself is productive labour" (1962a:196, 531; 1965:1001, emphasis in the French version). The labour process in

question is 'simple labour process', and the concerned activity is a physical necessity of human life and consequently is independent of any particular social form and is common to all social forms. However, this determination of labour as productive labour becomes "totally insufficient for capitalist production" (1962a:196).³ Under capital the concept of productive labour is in no way confined to a simple relation between the activity and its useful effect, between the labourer and the labour product, but includes, above all, a specific social, historically arisen, relation of production which "stamps the labourer as the direct material for the valorisation of capital." Therefore, "to be a productive labourer (under capital) is no luck, it is a misfortune" (1962a:196, 532, our emphasis). Productive and unproductive labour under capital is "always considered not from the standpoint of the labourer, but from the standpoint of the possessor of money, the capitalist." Here the use values incorporating productive labour could be of the 'most futile kind.' There is no question of a 'moral standpoint' (1956:127, 134; emphasis in text).⁴ Thus in a capitalist regime an individual (a woman or a man) doing purely domestic labour and not functioning as the "direct material for capital's valorisation" is, by definition, an unproductive labourer. From the point of view of capitalist production only the wage labour which through its exchange against the variable part of capital not only reproduces this part but also produces surplus value for the capitalist, is 'productive labour'. In short, 'only the wage labour, which produces capital, is productive' (1956:115).

It is not only the unpaid domestic labour producing use values that is considered unproductive, a lot of paid labour performed outside home would also qualify as unproductive under capital. This is the case with such services as those rendered by the activities of cooking, sewing, gardening, the activities of the menial servants in general, the activities of the state servants, advocates, doctors, scholars (many of them involving men) – all paid with money – which are simply 'personal services exchanged against income' and as such the labour involved is unproductive labour under a capitalist regime. "All these labourers, from the lowest to the highest, obtain, through their services – often under compulsion – a part of the surplus product, of the capitalist's income" (1953:372). The money that its possessor "exchanges against living labour in such cases is not capital, but income, money

as simple means of circulation in order to obtain use values in which the form of value is posited as something that disappears. This is not the money which through the purchase of labour (power) aims at conserving itself and valorising itself as such. The exchange of money as revenue, as simple means of circulation against living labour, can never posit money as capital and thereby wage labour in the economic sense." (1953:370-71, 372). And only wage labour "in the strictly economic sense," producing capital, is productive labour. Thus labour to be 'productive' in this world of 'universal alienation' must correspond to the logic of capital. In other words, only that labour is recognised as productive which produces surplus value and, thereby capital. This logic comes out very clearly in the classical political economy – the 'science of the bourgeoisie' (as Marx would call it), reaching its most representative expression in Ricardo – as Marx observes in different places of his work. As the young Marx had already observed while referring to Ricardo's work, "the cynicism is in the things and not in the words which express them" (1965:26). It is well known that Marx's projected future society where the humankind starts its (real) 'history' leaving its 'pre-history' behind, will have nothing to do either with commodity or with capital (wage labour). If only the exchange-value and thereby, capital producing labour is productive labour in the eyes of Marx, then, in what he conceives as the post-capitalist "association of free individuals", all human labour would be unproductive.

Conclusion

Much of what Lokaneeta says (echoing the dominant trend in the feminist movement) in her criticism of the 'Marxists' on the women's question would apply to 'post-Marx Marxism' in which patriarchy has dominated. However, as we argued above on the basis of Marx's own texts, her criticisms in no way apply to Marx. Not only throughout his life Marx spoke out against women's domestic 'slavery' and 'exploitation' beginning with the triumph of patriarchy, but, coming to modern times, he also underlined women's infinite 'degradation' and their gender-differentiated exploitation under capital's "werewolf gluttony for surplus labour" (1962a:280). Marx does not stop there. He goes even further. True to the principle of 'dialectic of negativity' – enunciated in his Parisian manuscripts (1844) – Marx shows that while capital degrades and physically ruins labouring women along with its act of dissolution of the family itself, it also creates, antagonistically,

through the very same process, the elements of a higher form of family along with the elements of a higher form of society as a whole.⁵ As Marx emphasises, "in history, as in nature, putrefaction is the laboratory of life" (1965:995, the phrase uniquely appears in the French version and is not reproduced in any German version). [EW]

Notes

- 1 The discussion below draws on Chattopadhyay (1999).
- 2 The charge of neglecting 'use value' was already levelled against Marx in his lifetime by, for example, A Wagner to whom Marx replied that far from being neglected, 'use value in me plays an important role completely different from the one played in hitherto existing (political) economy' (1962b: 371).
- 3 'Productive labour is simply that labour which produces capital' that is, 'only that labour is productive which produces its own opposite' (1953:212; emphasis in manuscript).
- 4 As Marx observes, 'to be productive labour (under capital), its determination in and for itself has nothing to do with the definite content of the labour, its specific usefulness or the specific use value where it is represented' (1988:113; emphasis in manuscript). It is a determination of labour which arises from its 'specific social form...from the social relations of production in which it is realised' (1956:120). A school teacher is productive 'not because he forms the minds of his students, but because he works for the enrichment of his boss. That the latter has invested his capital in a school factory instead of in a sausage factory does not at all change the relation' (1962a: 532; 1965:1002).
- 5 In his first manuscript of Capital II, Marx completes Spinoza's famous phrase 'all determination is negation' with 'all negation is determination' (1988: 216; this manuscript was not published in Engels's version)

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