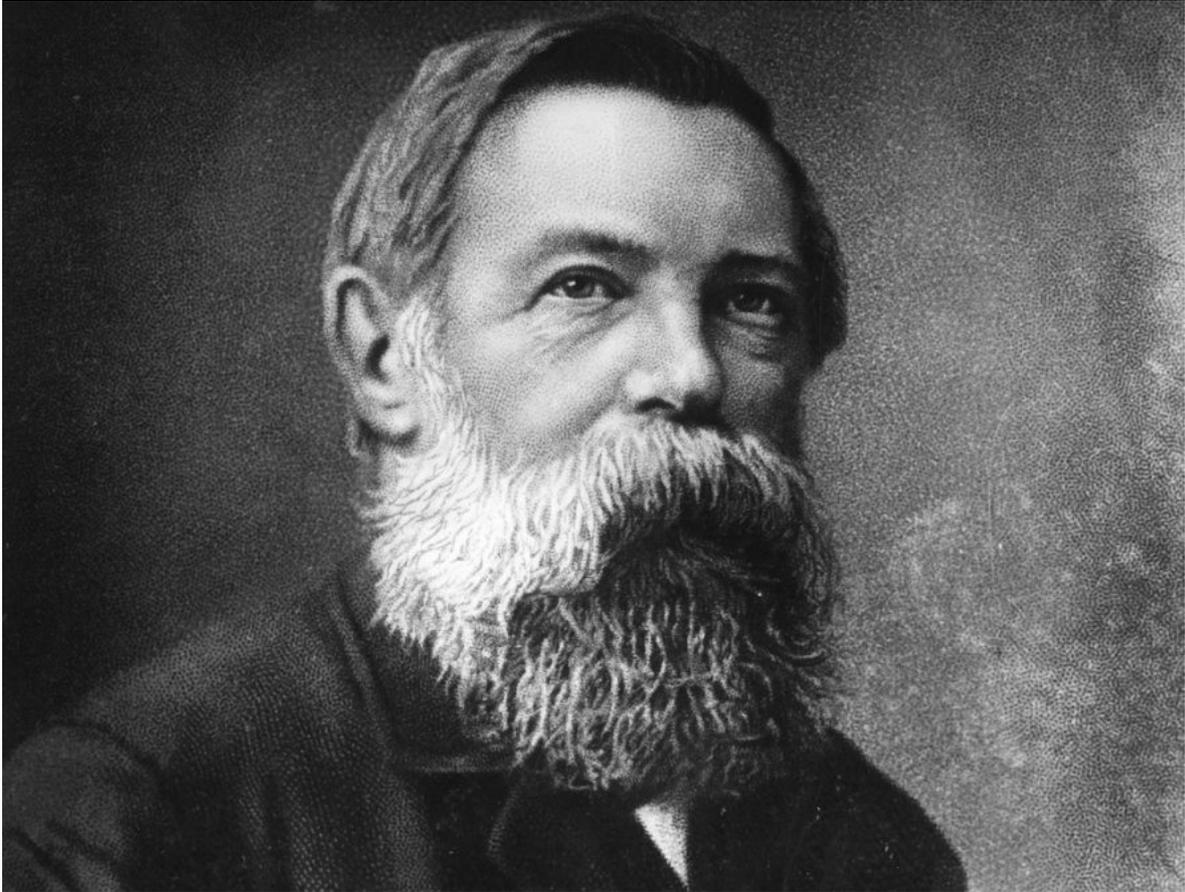


The Feminist Vision of Friedrich Engels

In his book *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Friedrich Engels linked the “world-historical defeat of the female sex” to the rise of class exploitation. Engels helped lay the foundations for a Marxist understanding of women's oppression.



German philosopher and economist Friedrich Engels in Germany, 1845. (Portfolio Mondadori via Getty Images)

The son of wealthy textile manufacturers, Friedrich Engels enjoyed the good life that fortune afforded him, shared his wealth (including, famously, to support Karl Marx's writing), and (mostly) rebelled against the bourgeois values which he was expected to embody. Scandalously for a man of his background, he had a long-term relationship with an Irish, working-class woman whom he met while working for one of his family's businesses in Manchester.

Accounts of their relationship credit Mary Burns with guiding Engels through miserable corners of the city and providing him with insights necessary for the development of *The Condition of the Working Class in England* in 1844. In an intentional rejection of bourgeois values, the two never married.

In his book *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels linked the “world-historical defeat of the female sex” to the rise of class exploitation. *Origins* has certain flaws, but it's still a vital work on the history of women's oppression.

One gets the impression, however, that this decision made things easier for Engels socially — Mary was by all accounts functionally illiterate and (one imagines with good reason) outspoken. He was devastated when she died, suddenly, at the age of forty: she and Engels had been together for twenty years. Marx's apparent indifference to his friend's grief is, according to biographical lore, the source of their one major argument.

We know little about Mary Burns, despite her obvious importance. After she died, Engels took up with Mary's formidable sister Lizzie, who had lived with them and helped take care of the household. When Lizzie became Engels's partner, another Burns woman (Mary Ellen, a niece) moved into the house and took up Lizzie's work. I like to think that Engels chose to live not with a wife, but with women.

This household was maintained at a slight remove from his public life, however: these women lived in a second home, and their relationship with Engels was sustained as an open secret. Engels was drawn to the idea of worlds in which women enjoyed more sexual freedom, children were raised with many mothers, and social authority was shared and even, in important ways, centered on women. He echoed the position of feminists of the era such as Victoria Woodhull who condemned marriage as a state-sanctioned form of prostitution.

Property and Family

"The origin of private property," Marx and Engels write in *The German Ideology*, "lies in the family, where wife and children are the slaves of the husband." In *Capital*, sex difference quietly anchors Marx's elaborations on the division of labor ("the distribution of labor within the family and the labor-time expended by the individual members of the family, are regulated by differences of age and sex").

"In *Capital*, sex difference quietly anchors Marx's elaborations on the division of labor."

In their writings, sex workers step forward as the embodiments of what capitalism does to the soul: "Prostitution," we learn from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, "is only a *specific* expression of the *general* prostitution of the laborer." Sex is a vanishing point in which we disappear into nature; the distinction between men and women operates as a powerful given: "the relation of man to woman is the most natural relation of human being to human being," it is "the direct, natural and necessary relation of person to person." In the relationship of "man to woman," "men's relation to nature is immediately his relation to man, just as man's relation to man is immediately his relation to nature — his own *natural* function."

Concentrate on the language of sex/gender in Marxist literature and you might get dizzy: the division of the world of labor into production and reproduction is rooted in so-called natural distinctions between men and women, but the scaffolding for that binary narrative is remarkably brittle. In general, the writings of Marx and Engels about gender difference are most compelling not where the gender binary stabilizes their thought, but where it crumbles and falls apart.

Industrial capital poisons and rips open the family: this fact supplies much of the outrage which propels Engels's *Condition of the Working Class in England*. There, in the stinking rag heap of that book's unrelenting inventory of human miseries, one finds a set of provocations about the family. Because their labor is systemically devalued and because women and children are, on the whole, smaller than men, women and children are both more suited to operating factory machines and more desirable as workers. They cost less; they take up less space.

Engels shares stories about women driven to work just days after giving birth, leaking milk into their clothes, and babies fed laudanum (an opiate) to keep them quiet. As work for men dries up, they find themselves "stuck" at home, stewing in squalor and rage. "This condition," he writes in prose that distills itself into sneering irony,

. . . unsexes the man and takes from the woman all womanliness without being able to bestow upon the man true womanliness, or the woman true manliness — this condition which degrades, in the most shameful way, both sexes, and, through them, Humanity, is the last result of our much-praised civilization, the final achievement of all the efforts and struggles of hundreds of generations to improve their own situation and that of their posterity.

Scenes of disordered sexual life punctuate this portrait of the impact of industrial capital on the lives of the working poor. Men, women, and children "sleep in revolting confusion," "disordered functions of the uterus are almost universal among girls," and working women manifest an "actual dislike to family life." Sex is chaotic, pregnancies are illegitimate and early, and prostitution rampant.

"Marxist literature is haunted by the injuries that private property systems inflict on what is taken to be our most intimate forms of relation. It is also activated by a sense that things might be otherwise." Engels's anger flows from one breathless sentence to another. He pulls our attention up from the

gutter every now and again, to offer startling propositions:

We must either despair of mankind, and its aims and efforts, when we see all our labor and toil result in such a mockery, or we must admit that human society has hitherto sought salvation in a false direction; 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. If the reign of the wife over 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. If the wife can now base her supremacy upon the fact that she supplies the greater part, nay, the whole of the common possession, the necessary inference is that this community of possession is no true and rational one, since one member of the family boasts offensively of contributing the greater share. If the family of our present society is being thus dissolved, this dissolution merely shows that, at bottom, the binding tie of this family was not family affection, but private interest lurking under the cloak of a pretended community of possessions. That word “pretended” denaturalizes the monogamous, patriarchal family; the juxtaposition of “community” and “possessions” is meant to shock us out of our sentimental attachments to marriage and home. Marxist literature is haunted by the injuries that private property systems inflict on what is taken to be our most intimate forms of relation. It is also activated by a sense that things might be otherwise.

Confronting the Ghost

If sexual life frequently haunts the margins of what Marx and Engels wrote, it is in *The Origins of Family, Private Property, and the State* that Engels confronts that ghost. The book’s title is an argument: If there is an origin story for these three structures, there is also a time before, a world populated by other forms of kinship and relationships to people, resources, and land. Indeed, Engels dedicates much of the book to re-presenting the work of those who studied kinship practices across the globe and across time, and who attempted to map the relationship between kinship and sociopolitical dynamics.

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Eleanor Burke Leacock reminds us that Engels’s work was, for a long time, “relegated to the status of a ‘woman’s book,’ peripheral to the scholarly domain.” It still sits there, sought out by scholars of feminist thought and those Marxists who commit themselves to understanding the relationship between sexual and economic life. The book’s assertions, especially those concerning matrilineal kinship systems, were shocking not only for its first readers, but for the generations of twentieth-century scholars who worked to shore up the disciplinary architecture of white patriarchy.

This book declares that one cannot theorize the operations of a private property system without understanding social systems of belonging and exclusion which manage the reproduction of life and labor. Even though intersectional modes of analysis do not inform the text, when Engels centers kinship and social reproduction in his analysis, he makes an important contribution to the development of intersectional practices in Marxist thought.

A full reckoning with the relationship between division, alienation, and exploitation requires theoretical models like Gayle Rubin’s sex/gender system (“a systematic social apparatus which takes up females as raw materials and fashions domesticated women as products”), or Cedric Robinson’s theorizations of racial capitalism and black radical contributions to anti-capitalist struggle, to name just two major figures who have taken on such questions. I encourage people to read Engels’s work both in the intellectual and historical context within which it was written, and the intersectional, decolonial contexts through which we read it today.

Marx and Morgan

This book grew out of Marx’s notes on the works of the American scholar Lewis H. Morgan, which include *League of the Ho-dé-no-sau-nee, or Iroquois* (1851), *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1871), and *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery, through Barbarism to Civilization* (1877). Marx and Engels followed and debated ethnological work of the period: they both saw, in the general intellectual project of the emerging

discipline, a potential ally for their own work exploring social transformation over time.

After Marx's death in 1883, Engels took on the work of realizing his collaborator's unpublished projects. Morgan's work figured heavily in Marx's papers. Morgan presented forms of human society as emerging in dynamic tension with the natural environment: the family, in his work, is a mobile, historically contingent, and material structure.

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Importantly, for Marx and Engels, Morgan links the specific shape and character of kinship systems to access and control of material resources. He offers a developmental model in which one kinship system evolves from and retains the traces of another; these stages in the evolution of kinship are also, in Morgan's work, associated with the emergence of a wide range of cultural developments (such as the use of certain kinds of tools, the development of language, or property relations).

Marx and Engels recognized elements of their own intellectual project in Morgan's emphasis on the relationship between material conditions (availability of resources, population growth, etc.) and social systems. Drawing from the American's work, Engels argues that the forms that hold our sense of family and belonging have a developmental origin in mother-centered societies characterized by group marriage, greater forms of sexual autonomy (e.g. marriages were more easily dissolved), and group parenting.

In a direct challenge to the thinking of his day, he identifies the unraveling of these social forms not as a manifestation of men's inherent strength and natural inclination, but as an effect of the development of practices which enabled a shift from labor oriented by immediate need to labor oriented toward producing goods that could be stored, exchanged, and transmitted from one generation to another. As these systems evolve, women, via their reproductive capacity, become a resource controlled by a patriarchal head of household, through whom lines of inheritance are articulated.



Lewis H. Morgan. (Wikimedia Commons)

Engels lifts the spirit of his linking of family structures with property systems and his developmental argument directly from Morgan's work. *Origins* closes with a long citation of Morgan's work, pulled from the conclusion to *Ancient Society*. "Since the advent of civilization," that passage opens, "the outgrowth of property has been so immense, its forms so diversified, its uses so expanding and its management so intelligent in the interests of its owners, that it has become, on the part of the people, an unmanageable power. The human mind stands bewildered in the presence of its own creation." For Marx and Engels, work like Morgan's was important for the dismantling of exactly this

bewildering effect. Morgan's *Ancient Society*, in particular, showed that it was possible to historicize relationships between people, and between people and property. The project furthermore implicates intimacy and kinship in larger systems: the family is a fractal expression of the logic of the whole. In his notes on Morgan's text, Marx asserts that the modern family "contains in miniature all the contradictions which later extend throughout society and its state."

A World-Historical Defeat

Origins more than earns its place on the feminist bookshelf. As Imani Perry has written, we encounter "modern patriarchy at the intersection of three legal formations, personhood, sovereignty, and property" — an intersection from which it generates human shapes for each of these categories. We can see roots for this feminist argument in Engels's text, which is punctuated by lacerating sentences that describe the patriarchal family as a sinister entanglement of marriage and ownership.

For Engels, the "world-historical defeat of the female sex" was precipitated in part (and most crucially) by the accumulation of chattel — livestock and slaves. The word *family*, he reminds us, has its roots in a Latin term "invented by the Romans to denote a new social organism, whose head ruled over wife and children and a number of slaves, and was invested under Roman paternal power with rights of life and death over them all."

This form of patriarchy, he declares, produces its own unholy trinity of subordinates: wife, prostitute, and slave. As Engels writes:

It is the existence of slavery side by side with monogamy, the presence of young, beautiful slaves belonging unreservedly to the man, that stamps monogamy from the very beginning with its specific character of monogamy for the woman only, but not for the man. And that is the character it still has today.

Within this form of the family, which reproduces itself across time in the controlled transmission of property from one generation to the next through a paternal line, women become property's intimates — they are its managers, they are property themselves and they are an amalgamation of both. This family system is deeply implicated in capitalist forms of exploitation and, Engels argues, must be dismantled:

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.

Marxist feminists have pushed these arguments much farther. The problem for such readers lies not in Engels's spirited critique of the patriarchal, monogamous family unit, but in the sense of evolutionary progression which locates women in a kind of pre-colonial, pre-capitalist space, and which situates the path to liberty in women's entry into the proletariat. The notes of Marx on Morgan emphasize the latter's take on the family as a kind of social fossil, holding people in archaic forms of relation ("the modern family contains not only slavery [*servitus*], but also serfdom").

Nonfeminist Marxist work underestimates the importance of reproduction, as "underdeveloped" (undervalued, underpaid, difficult to index, etc.), to capitalism's functioning. Marx and Engels might have written differently about the family, and tied the narrative put forward in *Origins* more closely to the processes they theorize elsewhere as "primitive accumulation," if they had taken as their paradigmatic labor form the combinations of enslaved, free, and waged labor staged on and around the plantation, extending their view from textile mills to slave markets and cotton fields.

Morgan and the Iroquois

White supremacist, eugenicist language is threaded throughout Morgan's text, upon which that of Engels is heavily reliant. This is most obvious in the language used to characterize phases in the development of human society: savagery, barbarism, and civilization. Morgan linked the technological capacities of social groups with physiological differences, describing indigenous communities as physical equivalents of early man. Engels mirrors these elements of Morgan's work, especially in his paraphrasing of the ethnologist's writings in the text's opening section, "Stages of Prehistoric Culture" (in which Engels assumes, for example, alignments between social development

and brain size).

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Section II, “The Family,” opens with a description of Morgan as having spent “a great part of his life among the Iroquois Indians — settled to this day in New York State.” Morgan’s credentials as an authority on Iroquois life are sealed by the fact that he “was adopted into one of their tribes (the Senecas).” Morgan lived in Rochester, New York — the ancestral and unceded territory of the O-non-dowa-gah, or Senecas of the League of Iroquois People.

He founded a fraternal organization whose structure was modeled after the Iroquois Confederacy, and “whose initiation ceremonies,” as Scott Michaelsen explains, “involved turning Anglo men into modern-day representatives of dead Cayuga Indian warriors.” Societies like this abounded during the period, generating a sense of deep time for white men who longed for their own sense of the Ancient — for what they saw as a more pure, authentic mode of living. From these rituals and their attendant narratives, they salvaged a sense of national identity from what they saw as an inevitably disappearing Native world.



Ulysses S. Grant’s staff; Ely S. Parker sits on the far left. (Wikimedia Commons)

Morgan’s scholarship on Iroquois society evolved directly from his life within this fraternal order. It was important to him that the language and rituals used in his society be accurate, so he incorporated the study of Iroquois tradition and ritual into the group’s charge. As Philip Deloria observes, this attempt to shore up the integrity of the club’s citations of Iroquois practice instituted a major shift, as members “found themselves dealing not simply with their own cultural imagination, but with actual Indian people.”

It was at this moment that Morgan struck up a friendship with a teenager called Ely S. Parker, a member of a respected Tonawanda Seneca family. Morgan’s work depended on Parker and his family, as they generously shared information and facilitated his invitations to spend time on the reserve. Long sections of his *League of the Ho-de-no-sau-nee, or Iroquois* reproduce Parker’s writings. That book is dedicated to him; today, Parker is sometimes acknowledged as its coauthor. Ely Parker’s biography is remarkable. He was the Tonawanda Seneca *sachem* (leader) and worked as military secretary to Ulysses S. Grant during the US Civil War. Parker drafted the terms of Robert E. Lee’s surrender. In 1871, Grant appointed him Commissioner of Indian Affairs. As Michelle Raheja notes, “Parker held positions of power in the US government unmatched by Indians even by twenty-first century standards.”

He left behind a rich, complex archive of largely unpublished material that Raheja and other scholars describe as offering important counter-narratives to Morgan’s writings, as well as strategic forms of silence and biting satire with regards to Morgan’s attempt, not merely to appreciate and understand

Iroquois society, but actually to *become* Indian. As Morgan's text went on to become a key (and controversial) work of anthropology and a source of inspiration for Marx and Engels, Parker disappears from Marxism, dissolving into so much raw data.

Missed Opportunities

There is no treasure trove of unpublished writing to mine for insight into the contribution of Mary Burns to the writings of Engels about the family. Even secondary information about her is faint — a reflection of the fact Engels kept his life with the Burns women at a slight remove from his public life. Even the claim that she played an important role in the development of *The Conditions of the Working Class* is a deduction. In literature exploring Engels's life and work, her story is one of speculation.

And speculate we do!

Take, for example, Engels's own imaginative ideas about class and sexual freedom. He argues that among the bourgeoisie, marriage is primarily a form of asset management and is, at its root, a form of prostitution for both husband and wife. The wife here “only differs from the courtesan in that she does not let out her body on piece-work as a wage-worker, but sells it once and for all into slavery.” And from there he projects a desire for sexual freedom downward: “sex-love with a woman becomes, and only becomes, the real rule among the oppressed classes, which means today among the proletariat — whether this relation is sanctioned or not.”



Mary Burns. (Wikimedia Commons)

There are very few traces in this work of an intellectual engagement with the sexual radicalism that grew around Marx and Engels in the last decades of their lives. This book was written at a moment when writers, scholars, artists, and activists were openly renegotiating the terms of the family, love, and intimacy. To give you a sense of just how close that spirit was to Engels's circles, let me just describe one area in which one might reasonably expect awareness.

Generations of nineteenth-century readers picked up Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, first published in 1855, and turned to each other to ask: "Do you see what I see?" Many of those readers were both socialist and gay, and found, in Whitman's writing, a space where these aspects of their being could be imagined in an organic harmony.

Those readers included Edward Carpenter, one of the first to issue a public call to change the laws criminalizing homosexuality, and an important figure in the history of the socialist movement in England. Carpenter modeled his book-length poem *Towards Democracy* on *Leaves of Grass*, and it is even more explicit in its vision for a utopian alignment of sexual freedom with the elimination of exploitation and wealth accumulation.

Carpenter, whose home functioned as an experimental, utopian community, and whose partner George Merrill was, like Mary Burns, working-class, was not even a degree removed from Engels. He read the work of Engels and Lewis Morgan, and was a member of the Socialist League, whose members included Eleanor Marx and, for a time, Engels himself. Carpenter and his circle questioned absolutely everything, including and especially the relationship between sex, love, family, property, and the state. One might also locate Engels on the edges of other provocative networks, centered on figures like Oscar Wilde, Victoria Woodhull, and John Addington Symonds.

The more one knows about the vibrant sexual politics of this period, the more surprising it is to find that heterosexuality is not up for analysis in the writings of Engels, especially in *Origins*. When queer figures appear in the Marxist canon, sadly it is usually in the most passing commentary, where they appear as diseased figures of enabling complicity, keeping symbolic company with figures of prostitution.

We can see one example of such discourse in a passage on the monogamous family:

This Athenian family became in time the accepted model for domestic relations, not only among the Ionians, but to an increasing extent among all the Greeks of the mainland and colonies also. But, in spite of locks and guards, Greek women found plenty of opportunity for deceiving their husbands. The men, who would have been ashamed to show any love for their wives, amused themselves by all sorts of love affairs with *hetairai*; but this degradation of the women was avenged on the men and degraded them also, till they fell into the abominable practice of sodomy [*Knabenliebe*] and degraded alike their gods and themselves with the myth of Ganymede.

The final sentence of this passage has been the subject of some debate in socialist circles, as people have tried to sort out the question of Engels's views on homosexuality and debated this translation. Was he, for example, condemning homosexuality, or pederasty (which is a more faithful translation of the word *Knabenliebe*) — and in that condemnation, was he referring to same-sex intergenerational relationships, or to child abuse?

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As much as one might wish otherwise, Engels's discourse lines up with the homophobic use of the term “sodomy” in this translation. Homophobic rhetoric thrives on the collapsing of homosexuality and paedophilia, casting same-sex intergenerational relationships as atavistic, crisis-ridden throwbacks. In my view, no translation of this passage will dig itself out from under the poverty of Marx and Engels's thinking about sexuality.

One finds Engels so close and yet so far from realizing the full potential of the important work of denaturalizing and demystifying the term “family.” Sex in *Origins* is at once the site of mystification and material extraction — it is the scene of crime, the nature of which is rendered into a timeless mystery in order that this crime might live on, as its own machine of perpetual motion.

This is an extract from Jennifer Doyle's introduction to the [new Verso edition](#) of *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* by Friedrich Engels.