

Response to Harold Benenson, “Victorian Sexual Ideology . . .”

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Hal Benenson's critique of Marx has succeeded in obscuring nearly totally the crucial relationship of women's liberation to Marx's overall dialectic of liberation. David Montgomery's response, which treats Engels, Kautsky and Bebel as having essentially the same position as Marx on women, but who "addressed themselves to the question more systematically," further distorts the question. As posed by Benenson and not contested by Montgomery or Ellen Ross, Marx's revolutionary vision was restricted to the "male working class" as "sole agency of emancipation." Nothing could be further from the truth.

In "Private Property and Communism" from his *1844 Essays*, Marx wrote not only on property forms and human emancipation in general, but specifically on the man-woman relationship at the very time that he was developing his concept of the proletariat: ". . . the relation of man to woman is the most natural relation of human being to human being. It therefore reveals the extent to which man's natural behavior has become human . . . the extent to which he in his individual existence is at the same time a social being."¹ Benenson ignores this, arguing that "Marx formulated his views on the development and historical role of the working class in 1847 and 1848." When we do get to 1847–48, Benenson writes that in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels denied women's oppression inside the working class. Yet there they advocate abolition of the family, not just the bourgeois family: "Abolition of the family! Even the most radical flare up at this infamous proposal of the communists."² Benenson ignores this crucial passage.

Benenson then takes up *Capital*, writing that "Marx regarded the essential relationships between male and female workers to be founded on 'natural differences of sex'." He is discussing the chapter "Machinery and Modern Industry," where he reads Marx as a Proudhonist seeking to keep women in the home and out of the working class. But in that very chapter, further on, Marx writes that "as terrible and disgusting" the exploitation of all members of the family in industry was in its capitalist form, "to women, young persons and children of both sexes, (it) does nevertheless create a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and of relations between the sexes."³ He adds that it would be "absurd to regard the Christian-Germanic form of the family as absolute and final." Hardly concerned only with the white male proletariat, in *Capital* he had also written on Blacks in a

reference to the U.S. Civil War: "Labor in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin."⁴

In the period of the early 1870s, Marx restructured *Capital*, following the Paris Commune of 1871.⁵ At that time, he also posed very sharply the question of women's participation in the Commune, proposing that new exclusively women's sections of the First International be established because: "Women play a very great role in life, they work in the factories, they participate in the strikes, in the Commune, etc. They are more zealous than men."⁶ Not only did he continue to see women as a revolutionary subject, at the same conference he broke with the English union leaders from the skilled trades who, though part of the International, refused to support the Commune: "The trade unions, he said, are an aristocratic minority. Poor working people could not belong to them."⁷

Then there is the question of Marx's last decade, 1873–1883, which Benenson also ignores. A major work produced in this period, his 250-page *Ethnological Notebooks*, discuss man-woman kinship relations in primitive society and the relationship of that to modern society. Marx writes for example, paraphrasing the anthropologist Morgan: "From the beginning to the end under the Greeks a principle of studied selfishness among the males, tending to lessen the appreciation of women, scarcely found among savages. The usages of centuries stamped upon the minds of Grecian women a sense of their inferiority." But then he critiques Morgan, as follows: "But the proportion of goddesses on Olympus shows a recollection of an earlier, freer and more influential position of women. Juno reigns, the goddess of wisdom springs from the head of Zeus, etc."⁸

Raya Dunayevskaya argues in her recent analysis of Marx on women: "Marx held that the Greek goddesses on Olympus were not just statues, but expressed myths of past glories that may, in fact, have reflected a previous stage, and/or expressed a desire for a very different future."⁹ Although Engels saw Marx's notebooks, his *Origin of the Family* approached Morgan uncritically. He saw only the greatness of women's freedom in primitive society and after the onset of private property, he saw only women's oppression. After the birth of class society, where Engels saw only a "world historic defeat" of the female sex, Marx saw unceasing revolt. Benenson ignores Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks* and concludes that Engels' *Origin of the Family* was a "sharp departure from" (and an improvement on) Marx's alleged concern with only the male proletariat.

It is not that Marx fully anticipated the creativity of today's women's liberation movement. It is not that women writers such as Flora Tristan did not make their own original contributions. But to argue that Marx was concerned exclusively with the European and North American male proletariat is to violate the historical record. It also deprives today's movements—whether of women, Blacks, youth or labor—of the full revolutionary vision of Marx, a vision we need more than ever to meet the challenges of the 1980s. To get to that vision, we must first separate Marx from the post-Marx Marxists.

NOTES

1. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, (New York, 1975), III, 269.
2. *Ibid.*, VI, 501.
3. Marx, *Capital*, (Middlesex, 1976), I, 620–621.
4. *Capital*, I, 414.
5. Some of these changes have yet to appear in English. See my “The ‘Unknown’ Marx’s *Capital*”, *Review of Radical Political Economy* 16:4 (1984, forthcoming).
6. Quoted in J. Freymond (ed.), *La Première Internationale* (Geneva: 1962), II, 168.
7. Notes of this 1871 speech are included in Saul Padover (ed.), *The Karl Marx Library*, (New York, 1973), III, 141.
8. *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx*, edited and transcribed by Lawrence Krader (New York and Frankfurt, 1983), 121.
9. Raya Dunayevskaya, “Marx’s ‘New Humanism’ and the Dialectics of Women’s Liberation in Primitive and Modern Societies”, *Praxis International* 3, (January, 1984), 379. See also her fuller treatment in *Rosa Luxemburg, Women’s Liberation and Marx’s Philosophy of Revolution* (New Jersey, 1982).