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Nicole Baltzer

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ON THE WOMAN QUESTION: A DEFENSE OF  
ALEXANDRA KOLLONTAI AGAINST LIBERAL CRITICS

by

NICOLE BALTZER

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2021

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On The Woman Question: A Defense of Alexandra Kollontai Against Liberal Critics

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Nicole Baltzer

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

On The Woman Question: A Defense of Alexandra Kollontai Against

Liberal Critics

by

Nicole Baltzer

Advisor: Susan Buck-Morss

Alexandra Kollontai envisioned a world in which all women and their proletarian comrades were liberated from subordination under capitalism. She served as People's Commissar in the Bolshevik government and established the Zhenotdel, the government's department for women. Under the Bolsheviks, women were granted equal legal status to men, divorce rights, access to birth control, and were the primary benefiteres of the nationalization of domestic work (i.e., communal childcare, dining, and laundry halls). Kollontai and the Soviet Union provide us with one of the few examples of Marxist feminism in action. Liberal critics of Kollontai and her Marxist comrades and contemporaries voice concern over whether or not women's issues can equally coexist with class struggle. Marxists, to the liberal, do not extend *The Woman Question* – an intellectual project that examines society through the lens of women's conditions and roles within it – far enough, instead privileging class over gender as political categories. In many ways, liberals viewed the defeat of Bolshevism and later decline of the Soviet Union as validation of their critiques of Marxist feminism and as justification for dismissing it from mainstream feminist theory. There has recently been a resurgence of interest in Kollontai among Marxist academic and activist circles. Though Kollontai herself would not identify as a feminist, her political work and writing is an integral contribution to Marxist feminist theory today. When we return to her work, we can see how she centers women in her class politics, despite criticisms from liberals that women's issues are forced to take a backseat when coexisting with class struggle. She calls for a revolution of property and social relations, proposing what she calls *Red Love*, a comradely, emancipatory alternative to capitalist romance. In this paper, I place Kollontai in conversation with her liberal critics and ultimately argue that what is often criticized as being her weakness – her unwillingness to compromise her radical class politics in her quest for women's liberation – is, instead, one of her strengths. If we as feminist theorists are sincere in our commitment to women's liberation, we should be returning to the work of women like Alexandra Kollontai.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not exist without the support of several people, all to whom I owe a great deal of thanks. My advisor, Susan Buck-Morss, has been an incredible mentor throughout my time at the Graduate Center. Working with her on this project has been an invaluable opportunity. Over the past three years at the Graduate Center, I've been lucky enough to see my peers and classmates turn into dear friends. Their love, comradery, and scholarly insight have helped me see this project through.

Special thanks to Kamran, Caroline, and, of course, to Matt. Thank you to my mom for all the support throughout my years in academia.

Information should be free and accessible to all who want it. I must acknowledge the people behind *marxists.org* and *Project Gutenberg*. Because of their work, I was able to obtain complete, open-source transcriptions and translations of the primary texts referenced throughout this project, which otherwise would have been costly or difficult to locate.

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*“How could you ever hope to have a successful revolution without enlisting women?”*  
— Alexandra Kollontai, “Vasilisa Malygina”

*“I always believed that the time inevitably must come when woman will be judged by the same moral standards applied to man. For it is not her specific feminine virtue that gives her a place of honor in human society, but the worth of the useful mission accomplished by her, the worth of her personality as human being, as citizen, as thinker, as fighter.”*  
— Alexandra Kollontai, “The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman”

### *Introduction*

As a student of feminist theory, sometimes it seems as if the more I read, the less I know. It is easy in the academy to get bogged down in debates over semantics, distancing yourself further and further from the goal. For feminist theorists, at least to me, that goal should be actively working towards women’s liberation. Instead, it seems as if feminist theory is heading down the route of its academic cousins, conforming to the institution.

As I finish this project and my time in academia comes to an end, I think about what led me here, to Alexandra Kollontai. Perhaps it is a projection of my own insecurity, that I spent too many years getting caught up in academic debates, distracting myself from volunteering and organizing to make real, material progress. As much as Kollontai was writing, she was organizing. I respect that. Perhaps it is that I recognize my own politics in Kollontai. Until writing a paper for a graduate class on Democratic Socialism, I barely knew who she was. She was a footnote in a book I had read. But as I was reading her, it felt like the first time in academia I had ever been validated by someone, like she had been looking into the future and putting my thoughts into words. I could hear the liberal criticisms I was reading of her in past professors’ voices.



I think about her writing on love and relationships when examining my own now. When I think about my future now that I'm leaving academia, I think about Kollontai's organizing. A new leftist organization I am getting involved with celebrated her. They were the first people I didn't have to explain who she was to outside of class. It feels as if Kollontai has become a cross-generational mentor.

Of course, I am writing this paper because I think it is an academic contribution worth making. If feminist theorists are serious about working towards women's liberation, Kollontai is not someone we can continue to overlook. We would be wasting so much. This project is the mark I want to leave on academia of all the projects I've started, finished, abandoned throughout graduate school. It in many ways represents my own experiences, defending my radical Marxist views to a series of liberal professors; feeling frustrated with classmates and fellow union members who I found getting swept up in the ivory tower of academia when there was work to be done right outside our program's building.

I am also writing this paper as a love letter of sorts to feminist theory; not a formal academic discipline, but not *not* one either. I have been privileged to spend years in academia studying something that not only interested me, but was also personal. I have watched myself grow not just as a student, but as a feminist. I've learned how to articulate my own lived experiences. As I write this paper, though, I want more.

The professional, academic introduction to this paper would say that I am writing this because Alexandra Kollontai is a unique feminist figure who is worth studying. Her contributions to feminist theory have been vast, though she has largely been unfairly lost to history. If we are to progress towards women's liberation, then we need to take seriously her work and the work of her Marxist feminist comrades and contemporaries. All of these things are

true – but the real reason I’m writing this? If I have learned anything throughout my time in academia, it is that I want to be more like her.

Alexandra Kollontai was no stranger to controversy. Criticized by both feminists and her own party for being perceived as too radical, Kollontai envisioned a world in which women and all their proletarian comrades are liberated from the subordination we are familiar with under capitalism. Though there has been a resurgence of interest in Kollontai among contemporary Marxist feminists, Kollontai’s liberal critics remain skeptical of what they perceive as a Marxist tendency to privilege class over gender. When class struggle shares the stage with women’s liberation, it is women, critics of Marxist feminism argue, who are subordinated and deprioritized in sight of the larger goal.<sup>1</sup> While it is not unimaginable that women’s unique lived experiences would be sidelined when expected to fight alongside an historically male-driven movement, it would be irresponsible to position women and the working class as mutually exclusive political categories.

Kollontai was born in 1872 to an aristocratic family. Following his service in the Russian-Turkish War, her father was appointed Provisional Governor of Tarnovo, Bulgaria. After returning to Russia, her father faced trouble with the Tsar for a study he published on the war that was deemed insufficiently nationalistic, conveying liberal sentiments and sympathy for the British constitutional monarchy.<sup>2</sup> Her mother, who was initially forced into an arranged marriage, divorced her first husband to marry Kollontai’s father for love.<sup>3</sup> This break from tradition, combined with the fact that Kollontai’s mother already had children with her first

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<sup>1</sup> Heidi Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards A More Progressive Union,” *Capital & Class*, 1979, DOI: 10.1177/030981687900800102, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Feminist: The Life of Alexandra Kollontai*, Indiana University Press (Bloomington, 1979), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*, 1926, transcribed by *marxists.org*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1926/autobiography>.

husband, and bore Alexandra out of wedlock, made her parents' path to one another a tumultuous one. Eventually, they married. The story of her parents' union undoubtedly impacted Kollontai's personal politics, as she and her sister faced the same pressures to marry in an arrangement.

As an upper-class girl, Kollontai was well-educated, though her parents did not let her attend school, nor later university. She spoke multiple languages outside of Russian, including French, Finnish, German and English, which she learned from her parents and English nanny.<sup>4</sup> She worked closely with a tutor as a child, who she recounts as being clever and linked to revolutionary circles in Russia.<sup>5</sup> Though she considered herself to be shy as a child, Kollontai recalls a budding curiosity about the world. Despite all of these early intellectual pursuits, she recounts her parents having constant, severe anxiety at the thought of her being sent away to school for an education.<sup>6</sup> Described as a good writer, she passed her qualifying exams for university before she turned sixteen. However, she was still expected to lead the life of a "young society woman."<sup>7</sup>

Though she recounts having a happy childhood in her autobiography, she describes lingering feelings of wanting to be free, to be able to "*express desires of [her] own, to shape [her] own life.*"<sup>8</sup> She remembers having eyes for social injustice in Russia from a young age.

Kollontai took it upon herself to continue her education. Rebellious against her liberal family, she was inspired by Marxism's growing popularity in the 1890's and began reading the political writings of socialists like Friedrich Engels, August Bebel, and of course, Karl Marx. In 1894,

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<sup>4</sup> Tom Condit, "Alexandra Kollontai," *marxists.org*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/into.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Kollontai, *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

while raising her newborn son, Kollontai began teaching evening classes to workers in St. Petersburg, through which she became connected to the Political Red Cross, an organization intended to aid political prisoners.<sup>9</sup> In 1898, Kollontai left her son and husband to study Marxism in Germany.<sup>10</sup> On her decision to leave her family, she writes, “*I still loved my husband, but the happy life of a housewife and spouse became for me a "cage." More and more my sympathies, my interests turned to the revolutionary working class of Russia.*”<sup>11</sup> Before leaving for Europe, she read Bebel’s *Women & Socialism*, which is believed to have been a direct inspiration for her move.

August Bebel, a German socialist, understood that if production relies on the “invisible” work and physical reproduction provided by working class women in the private home, women were necessary recruits in the class struggle and therefore necessary recruits to the Socialist Democratic Party (SDP). In 1879, he wrote *Women & Socialism* with the explicit attempt to educate and organize German working-class women and republished it in 1910. What is right for the working class, he offers, cannot be wrong for women. He attributes women’s oppression to their forced dependence on men under capitalism.<sup>12</sup> Even bourgeois women are degraded by their husbands – while they are expected to perform the role of model wife and caring mother, their wealthy husbands commit adultery for sexual gratification. Sexual passion decreases once a man and woman are married, and what replaces it is a form of mental conformity, leaving both parties dissatisfied, though only the man has the power and autonomy to act on these impulses

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<sup>9</sup> Condit, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/intro>.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Mikolchak, *Encyclopedia of Women’s Autobiography K-Z*, edited by Victoria Boynton and Jo Malin, Greenwood Publishing Company, 2005, 326.

<sup>11</sup> Kollontai, *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*.

<sup>12</sup> August Bebel, Introduction, *Women & Socialism*, 1904, transcribed by *marxists.org*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bebel/1879/woman-socialism/introduction.htm>.

and behave as he desires.<sup>13</sup> His wife, on the other hand, is left to suffer in silence, putting on airs that all is well despite what happens, or doesn't happen, behind closed doors.

How can family conditions and, transitively, conditions for women, improve when a woman's mental status is, "*but what man, her master, has made of it?*" Bebel asks.<sup>14</sup> How can women be liberated when their wellbeing directly depends on that of their husband's? It is through the destruction of the capitalist family and a complete transformation of social conditions – and only through these – that women will truly become liberated, for Bebel.

Bourgeois women may believe capitalism can outlive patriarchy, but Bebel and his comrades and contemporaries find the capitalist family to be inherently oppressive – women are forced to sacrifice for their husband and children. This sacrifice is not a noble one, it is simply what is expected of them under capitalism. Even today, though we champion successful business and political women, their role as mothers and wives is not forgotten. Women are often married off to preserve the bourgeois system of property – throughout the history of the class system, men seeking to marry primarily do so to attain property through the form of dowries or inheritances. Working class men, Bebel observes, are more likely to marry for love than men of the bourgeoisie.<sup>15</sup>

Despite Kollontai's upper-class background, she was able to make sense of what Bebel is saying because, as he notes, under capitalism all women receive this treatment to varying degrees. Kollontai watched her sister be married off at a young age to a man decades her senior in order to ensure the family's class preservation, just as she heard the stories of her mother fleeing an arranged marriage. Kollontai did not want the same fate for herself, and following in

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<sup>13</sup> August Bebel, Chapter 10: Marriage as a Means of Support, *Women & Socialism*, transcribed by *marxists.org*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bebel/1879/woman-socialism/ch10.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

her mom's rebellious footsteps, later crossed her parents and married her cousin, Vladimir Ludvigovich, a poor engineering student, without their blessing.

The relationship between her and her mother is a difficult one to understand. Her mother, who left her first husband and gave birth to Kollontai outside of her first marriage, disapproved of Kollontai's decision to marry for love instead of money. Kollontai's parents "prided themselves on representing the liberal intelligentsia in czarist Russia."<sup>16</sup> To her parents, Kollontai would be considered radical. Kollontai describes herself as having "revolted against marriage of convenience" and instead married out of love and "great passion."<sup>17</sup> Though it is difficult to understand why Kollontai's mother could not sympathize more with her decision when she too rebelled against traditional marriage norms for love, I suspect it had something to do with their differing politics. In many ways Kollontai was rebelling directly against her family's noble liberal tradition.

From her studying in Germany, Kollontai fostered these radical views and began organizing workers, predominantly women, leading up to the 1917 Revolution. She covertly distributed pamphlets about workers' rights and conditions to factory workers, visited workers living in extreme poverty, and worked with various educational charities across Europe.<sup>18</sup> Her activism began more discreetly, working in libraries and teaching reading and writing classes to urban workers with subtle attempts to slip in Marxist ideas. The more time she spent with workers, the more her radical politics seeped into her work. In 1899, she joined Russia's illegal Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP), participating in underground organizing, and in 1904 committed herself to the Bolsheviks. She taught classes on Marx and became the Party's expert

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<sup>16</sup> Mikolchak, 325.

<sup>17</sup> Kollontai, *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

on Finland in particular, writing a series of publications intended to organize the Finnish people.<sup>19</sup> This led to her exile to Germany to evade arrest in 1908, where she joined the German SDP and later traveled across Europe writing and teaching on Marxism and radical politics.

Following the February Revolution of 1917, Kollontai returned to Russia and became an agitator for communist revolution. She worked on *Rabotnitsa*, the first magazine written for and by women workers and revolutionaries. She was notably the first woman to serve in the Russian government, appointed to the role of People's Commissar of Social Welfare under Lenin. Utilizing her political power, she founded the Zhenotdel, a women's department within the Bolshevik Party, meant to serve as a direct liaison between women in the Party and the government. Though Kollontai did not serve as People's Commissar for long after the revolution – she was dismissed by the Party for being considered too radical in her social views – her resume's vastness is impressive, especially for a woman of her time. Though her critics voice concern over whether or not her reading of *The Woman Question* extends far enough, she was conscious to center the experiences of the woman worker in her writing and her activism.

Though she is considered a feminist using today's criteria – much of her work is a staple of contemporary Marxist feminism – she actively distanced herself from the feminist movement of her day. Kollontai refers to the Western feminists of her time, that I today categorize as liberal feminists, as “bourgeois feminists.” In her autobiography she recalls a time in her youth when she was “accused” by the Menshevik Party of being a feminist for emphasizing too much the needs of women members.<sup>20</sup> Thankfully for her the charge did not stick. Kollontai herself explicitly rejected the ‘feminist’ label and liberal feminism as a liberatory praxis. She dismisses

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

it as a petit bourgeois project, whose aims are incapable of creating a world free of gender subordination. In 1909, she writes in “On the Social Basis of the Woman Question”:

*“Proletarian women have a different attitude [than feminists]. They do not see men as the enemy and the oppressor; on the contrary, they think of men as their comrades, who share with them the drudgery of the daily round and fight with them for a better future. The woman and her male comrade are enslaved by the same social conditions; the same hatred chains of capitalism oppress their will and deprive them of the joys and charms of life.”<sup>21</sup>*

Patriarchy was part of the problem, yes, but it was not the whole problem. Instead identifying as a proletarian woman or a woman-comrade, Kollontai argues struggles over sexual and gender subordination, and economic and social conditions need to occur simultaneously. Therefore, she found it necessary to ensure the socialist revolution would be responsive to the unique needs of women-comrades. Through promoting protections for women in the form of abortion rights, communal childcare, and marriage law reforms that abolished the proprietary relationship between a husband and wife, Kollontai used her position in the Party *following the revolution*, and later in the government, to try and make a socialist space an inherently “feminist” one.

### *The Woman Question*

I would be remiss not to acknowledge the unique nature of feminist theory as a field of study. It has no true home in academia, instead an interdisciplinary project woven together in the form of a “women's studies certificate” or an academic journal, composed of scholars from a variety of disciplines. As a nomad travels from place to place, the student of feminist theory takes classes from more than a dozen different academic departments to fulfill their coursework. Each professor trained not in the study of feminist theory, but in something else. Feminist theory

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<sup>21</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, “The Social Basis of the Woman Question,” 1909, translated by Alix Holt and transcribed by Andy Blunden for *marxists.org*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1909/social-basis.htm>.



becomes a lens through which we can observe bigger systems. How does [x topic] affect women? Or vice versa? It's often consolidated to a week in the syllabus – “Next week we're going to be talking about women.” Feminist theory, much like the women they study, is often left on the backburner in favor of a larger academic pursuit.

One who wishes to do feminist theory will most likely never come across a feminist theory or gender studies department.<sup>22</sup> They will be advised to house their research in a discipline that is “more marketable.” It is difficult to identify a feminist theory canon, if it is truly even possible. Feminist theory introductory courses seldom mirror the introductions to more established disciplines. When I took “Intro to Women & Gender Studies” as an undergraduate, the course was taught completely differently each semester it was offered, depending on which professor had the flexibility to fit it into the course-load from their own department. I took “Gender Justice” as my introduction to feminist theory, taught by my advisor in political science. A housemate of mine took “Women & Media” to fulfill the same requirement. Another friend, some iteration of “Women & Religion.” Our syllabi were all different with the exception of “Feminism is for Everybody” by bell hooks, if I recall correctly. When I came to graduate school, I was told PhD students could get a “women's studies certificate” if they took enough cross-listed courses. One of the qualifying courses I took for my Master's coursework barely mentioned women or feminism at all. This is not uncommon, nor is it necessarily the fault of the professor, who likely did not choose for their course to be cross-listed and received no institutional guidance on what that meant for the course. Nor is this to criticize interdisciplinary projects – quite the opposite, actually. Interdisciplinary work affords us the opportunity to think

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<sup>22</sup> These two terms are often conflated.

beyond the confines of what generations before us have deemed canon, it frees us from the limitations of how one is *supposed* to study the world.

Feminist theory arguably exists with the specific purpose of identifying, examining, and solving the societal conditions that cause and reproduce women's subordination. Feminist theorists tend to distinguish themselves from their colleagues primarily ideologically, as opposed to topically as we see in fields like political science, where you first have Americanists and comparativists before then breaking down into smaller groups by ideology or method. There are three primary schools of thought in feminist theory – liberal feminism, which is perhaps the most popular, Marxist feminism, and radical feminism. Over time other branches of feminist theory appeared to fill the gaps theorists believed were left by liberals, Marxists, and radicals. An introduction to feminist theory book will include chapters on things like ecofeminism, socialist feminism, existentialist feminist, psychoanalytic feminism, and “women of color feminisms,” among others.<sup>23</sup>

What ties feminist theorists methodologically, but separates them ideologically, is ultimately their approach to *The Woman Question*, an intellectual project that examines society through the lens of women's conditions and roles within in it. In modern times, feminist theorists take this a step further, theorizing how we can improve these conditions. For the purpose of this paper, I will be focusing exclusively on liberal and Marxist feminist approaches to *The Woman Question*, and the ways in which they exist at odds with one another, one critical of the other's ability to adequately address the needs of all women and ensure their liberation.

I divide the history of *The Woman Question* into two categories: pre-feminist thought and feminist thought. The emergence of feminist theory fundamentally altered the nature of *The*

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<sup>23</sup> Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought*, Westview Press, (Boulder, Colorado, 2014), pages 5-9.

Woman Question. Prior to feminist thought, thinkers were primarily concerned with observing society more broadly and asking The Woman Question was about answering *what do we do with women?* or *what is the woman's role?* in an ideal society. For most of history, The Woman Question existed as an exclusively masculine question. Women were the objects that men – the subjects, the “we,” the people asking the question, were trying to make sense of.<sup>24</sup> Men engaging with The Woman Question were not interested in improving women's conditions as much as observing the nature of women and their place in society.

Aristotle considers patriarchy to be the superior “form of government,” for the family,<sup>25</sup> and find women to be so biologically inferior to men that he attributes even sexual reproduction and fertility to the superiority of men's semen and not the biological capabilities of women.<sup>26</sup> For Aristotle, women have more in common with a prepubescent boy than they do with men.<sup>27</sup> It is not surprising, then, that Aristotle is opposed to extending equal rights to women, particularly those of voting and receiving an education. Women rank higher than slaves, but husbands were expected to exert political rule over their wives, as Aristotle believes women cannot be trusted to act rationally and honestly because it was in their nature to be deceptive and passive.<sup>28</sup>

Though Plato also subscribes to the common belief of the time that women were generally inferior to men, he *does* believe that exceptions were possible – in *The Republic*, he distinguishes himself from Aristotle, arguing that in the scenario an individual woman is superior to an individual man at a particular task – he is particularly concerned with doing philosophy – that the

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<sup>24</sup> Jamie Warren, “The Woman Question: A study of women in the world and their place in it,” lecture, (*The Strand Book Store*, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSMplt03aAk>.

<sup>25</sup> Maryanne Cline Horowitz, “Aristotle and Woman,” *Journal of the History of Biology*, vol. 9, no. 2, Springer (1976), 187.

<sup>26</sup> Horowitz, 193.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

woman should have the right to an education in that trade.<sup>29</sup> This was not necessarily out of Plato's compassion for women; Rather, he is concerned with reproducing the exact conditions of what he considers to be an ideal society. He is not concerned with improving the conditions of women, even though he appears to be more sympathetic to them. Simply put, the good of the state is more important to Plato than that of the individual. In the possible instance, then, that an individual woman can perform a certain task better than a man, it is in the best interest of society for the woman to do so.<sup>30</sup> Existing as a woman is still considered nonoptimal, and even a punishment for Plato. He claims men who were cowards and were lazy throughout their life will be reborn as women.<sup>31</sup>

It was not only the ancients who shared these views on women. For Rousseau, writing in the eighteenth century, the "republic of virtue" hinges entirely on women's exclusion from public life.<sup>32</sup> In his famous novel, *Emile, or On Education*, he writes, "*everything man and woman have in common belongs to the species, and ... everything which distinguishes them belongs to the sex.*"<sup>33</sup> Men and women, to Rousseau, are distinctly different. What women and men share in common make them equal, but in all the ways there are different, men are superior. Women are generally weak and dependent on men, and therefore are expected to please their husbands. In *Emile*, he contrasts the title character with Sophie, Emile's wife-to-be, and Rousseau's model of the ideal woman – "*Sophie ought to be a woman as Émile is a man — that is to say, she ought to have everything which suits the constitution of her species and her sex in order to fill her place*

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<sup>29</sup> Plato, Book V, *The Republic*, Translated by Allan Bloom, *Basic Books*, (1968).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, translated by Donald J. Zeyl, republished electronically by *Perseus Digital Library*, section 90e.

<sup>32</sup> Susan Grogan, "Playing the Princess: Flora Tristan, Performance, and Female Moral Authority During the July Monarchy," in *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth Century France*, edited by Jo Burr Margadant, *University of California Press*, (2000), 76.

<sup>33</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or Concerning Education*, translated by Alain Bloom, *Basic Books*, (New York, 1979), 358.

*in the physical and moral order.*"<sup>34</sup> Once again, the role of the woman is to compliment a man and society, to serve the social and sexual roles necessary to recreate Rousseau's ideal society. Though Sophie is notably educated in the novel, Rousseau made this choice not to advance the improvement of women's conditions, but to project his own experiences with women onto the character.

Feminism is often considered a twentieth century phenomenon, but liberal feminism in particular can be traced back to eighteenth century thinkers. Mary Wollstonecraft is often credited as being one of the earliest feminist writers, though no sort of organized women's movement existed at the time she is writing. Nonetheless, through her work we can see the nature of The Woman Question change. No longer acting as outside observers, thinkers like Wollstonecraft begin to challenge the status quo and theorize how women's lived conditions can be improved. Laying the groundwork for liberal feminism, Wollstonecraft challenges the notion that women's differences from men make them unequal and proclaims women should no longer be treated as if they do. In "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," she writes, "*Women, I allow, may have different duties to fulfil; but they are human duties, and the principles that should regulate the discharge of them, I sturdily maintain, must be the same.*"<sup>35</sup>

Wollstonecraft positions education specifically as a human right that should be extended to women, calling for nationalized, desegregated schooling. Responding directly to Rousseau, she writes, "*'Educate women like men,' says Rousseau, 'and the more they resemble our sex the less power will they have over us.'*" *This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over [ourselves].*"<sup>36</sup> Women's liberation is not about women claiming power over

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<sup>34</sup> Rousseau, 357.

<sup>35</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792, republished by T. Fisher Unwin (London, 1891), accessed digitally via *Google Books*, 92.

<sup>36</sup> Wollstonecraft, 107.

men, it is about women reclaiming autonomy over themselves. For Wollstonecraft, women are entitled to an equal caliber of education as men because even though their roles as mothers and wives are vastly different from men's, these roles are just as vital to the State. Without mothers and wives, children and husbands would have nobody to care for them or be their companions, and through education, Wollstonecraft believes women can achieve emancipation from gender inequality.

Though she was writing nearly two hundred and thirty years ago, Wollstonecraft's writing encapsulates the major tenets of liberal feminism that persist today – that patriarchy, which they claim to be the primary source of women's oppression, can be attributed to legal restraints, socialization that causes and perpetuates harmful stereotypes about women, and cultural norms. Liberal feminists are not concerned with revolution, and tend to argue against it, as they believe it is not institutions that are inherently patriarchal or misogynistic. Rather, it is the attitudes and traditions of *the individuals that fill them*, who serve as foot soldiers of patriarchy. Wollstonecraft blames men for the perception of women as weak and submissive, challenging the commonly accepted belief of the time that women were biologically inferior.

For liberal feminists, democratic and capitalist institutions are salvageable, because they are systems through which feminists can achieve progress. The system keeps women down, but for liberal feminists it has also been the vessel through which they have achieved equality. They see legal reform, political & media representation, and electoral progress as viable avenues for inducing change.<sup>37</sup> If we raise our sons to be feminists, they believe, a feminist world is possible. If we elect more women and advocate for women's rights in the courts and in Congress, then the

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<sup>37</sup> Tong, 12, 35.

country will become a more woman-friendly place. Gender equality is not impossible to the liberal, it is in many ways inevitable so long as we make a seat for women at the table.

The Marxist feminist approach to The Woman Question is perhaps the most internally skeptical of The Woman Question as an intellectual project. This is not because the Marxist doubts its importance or urgency. Though accused by the liberal of putting women's issues on the backburner, the Marxist feminist understands that women are doubly oppressed – by patriarchy *and* by capitalism. Flora Tristan, writing in the nineteenth century, was the first to explicitly link women's liberation to class struggle. Though she is less well known than Wollstonecraft, she is sometimes credited with laying the groundwork for modern feminist theory. Breaking tradition at the time, Tristan left her husband with two children and a third on the way, seeking out employment and a private life of her own.<sup>38</sup> Through her constant breaks with tradition, she partook in socialist forms of living, became more involved with political organizing against issues like capital punishment and for causes like granting divorce rights for women.<sup>39</sup> For Tristan, the link between socioeconomic conditions and women's liberation was unbreakable.<sup>40</sup> She famously declared, "*the Woman is the Proletarian of the Proletariat.*"

Alexandra Kollontai, following in the footsteps of her socialist predecessors, took seriously this relationship between capitalism and women's subordination, and was skeptical of the liberal feminist's ability to sufficiently address women's oppression without discussing class. In "On the Social Basis of the Woman Question," she writes:

*"The women's world is divided, just as is the world of men, into two camps: the interests and aspirations of one group bring it close to the bourgeois class, while the other group has close connections to the proletariat, and its claims for liberation encompass a full solution to the woman question. Thus, although both camps follow the general slogan of the "liberation of women," their aims and*

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<sup>38</sup> Grogan, 75.

<sup>39</sup> Grogan 75-77.

<sup>40</sup> Grogan, 78.

*interests are different. Each of the groups unconsciously takes its starting point from the interests and aspirations of its own class, which gives a specific class coloring to the targets and tasks it sets for itself . . . however apparently radical the demands of the feminists, one must not lose sight of the fact that the feminists cannot, on account of their class position, fight for that fundamental transformation of society, without which the liberation of women cannot be complete”<sup>41</sup>*

For Kollontai, women’s liberation is incompatible with capitalism, for as long as bourgeois women have their own, elevated class interests, they cannot truly advocate for all women. It is a bit ironic, then, that liberals’ critique of Marxists is that they will privilege the workers movement over their gender.

Kollontai is essentially making the same criticism of bourgeois women – that when confronted with a choice between what is good for their class and what is good for their gender, they will prioritize class preservation. The key difference between the two criticisms lies in who is left as collateral damage. Marxists take a bottom-up approach – in ensuring protection and equality for the most oppressed women, all women will be protected. Bourgeois women, whom Kollontai categorize as one and the same with Western liberal feminists, take a top-down approach. In advocating for their rights, the liberal feminist abandons her more oppressed sisters. Still, the liberal feminist addresses concern that in discussing gender in conjunction with class, women’s needs will be forced to take a backseat to those of the larger working class.

By discussing patriarchy alongside capitalism, Marxist feminists are not necessarily dismissing the unique struggles of women as they have so often been accused of doing. Acknowledging proletarian men’s experience as an oppressed class under capitalism can help us better understand *how* women’s struggles are different and layered.

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<sup>41</sup> Kollontai, “On the Social Basis of the Woman Question.”



For example, under capitalism, women as wives often absorb the anger of their husbands. Fran Ansley refers to women as wives as the “takers of shit.” She writes, “*when wife play their traditional role as takers of shit, the often absorb their husband's legitimate and frustration at their own powerlessness and oppression. With every worker provided with a sponge to soak up his possible revolutionary ire, the bosses rest more secure*”<sup>42</sup> In understanding how capitalism oppresses men we can better understand how women bear the socioeconomic brunt of proletariat oppression. Men come home from work, where they are often made to feel powerless, exploited, and disposable, a cog in the capitalist machine. Instead of directing their anger or resentment at the bourgeoisie, husbands (mis)direct their anger at their wives. They use the private home as an opportunity to be king of their own castle, free of the emasculation they experience as workers. Engels observes that the power dynamics between husband and wife mirrors that of the bourgeoisie and proletariat, respectively,<sup>43</sup> echoing the sentiments of Tristan who considered women to be the proletarians of the proletariat.

The essence of women’s oppression, to the Marxist, can be traced to the nuclear family in a class-based society.<sup>44</sup> The Marxist feminist is therefore skeptical of the extent to which reform alone can bring about liberation. Women are responsible for reproducing the labor force through domestic care work (feeding, educating, socializing, bathing children, as well as feeding, washing, and sexually satisfying their working husbands), as well as the literal physical labor of birthing the next generation of workers and soldiers, performing a specific, necessary service to

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<sup>42</sup> Fran Ansley, quoted in *The Future of Marriage* by Jessie Bernard, Yale University Press, 1982.

<sup>43</sup> Fredrich Engels, *The Woman Question: Selections from the Writings of Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, V.I Lenin, and Joseph Stalin*, International Publishers, (New York, 1951), 10.

<sup>44</sup> Sharon Smith, “Women’s Liberation: The Marxist Tradition,” *International Socialist Review*, Issue #93, 2014, <https://isreview.org/issue/93/womens-liberation-marxist-tradition>.

the state (under capitalism, working class women reproduce workers, while bourgeois women reproduce heirs).<sup>45</sup>

Women are forced to remain in the home, out of the public realm where labor is performed, and decisions are made. They are forced to perform unpaid, unrecognized domestic work with no chance of reprieve, for regardless of how carefully they do the laundry or dust the china or prepare the family's meals, there will always be a new mess to clean the next day and a hungry child and husband to feed. Just as Sisyphus will never be free, neither will the housewife from the burden of domestic drudgery.

Women's liberation and capitalism are therefore mutually exclusive to the Marxist. Women's oppression under capitalism is vastly two-fold: they are oppressed because they are women, often reduced to their reproductive obligation; and they are oppressed as proletarians. Proletarian women are forced to perform uncompensated domestic labor while relying on their husbands for whatever financial security he can attain. The precondition for women's liberation, then, rests on the eradication of the private family.

Kollontai takes this a step further. In her approach to *The Woman Question* there are two necessary conditions for women's liberation – revolutionizing women's social relations and relationship to production in the public realm:

*“Leaving it to the bourgeois scholars to absorb themselves in discussion of the question of the superiority of one sex over the other, or in the weighing of brains and the comparing of the psychological structure of men and women, the followers of historical materialism fully accept the natural specificities of each sex and demand only that each person, whether man or woman, has a real opportunity for the fullest and freest self-determination, and the widest scope for the development and application of all natural inclinations. The followers of historical materialism reject the existence of a special woman question separate from the general social question of our day. Specific economic factors were behind the subordination of women; natural qualities have been a secondary factor in this process. Only the complete disappearance of these factors, only the*

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

*evolution of those forces which at some point in the past gave rise to the subjection of women, is able in a fundamental way to influence and change their social position. In other words, women can become truly free and equal only in a world organized along new social and productive lines.*<sup>46</sup>

It is only through revolution, for Kollontai, that women can achieve liberation. By focusing solely on patriarchy and women's experiences as a singular political category, we fail to address all the societal conditions through which women have become oppressed. She is critical of the liberal attitude that it is merely the fault of men, as men's experiences under capitalism, *because of capitalism*, directly impact those of women.

Feminists' decision to position the movement's goals as diametrically opposed to patriarchy and masculinity, *to men*, Kollontai felt, was a mistake. It overestimated the liberatory capacity of overthrowing patriarchy without also, and more importantly, overthrowing capitalism. She interprets liberal feminism as accepting women's equality with men under capitalism as a sufficient goal. *Proletarian women*, however, understand that this goal does not address the economic oppression of the working class.<sup>47</sup> A working class woman will be violently oppressed by capitalism regardless of whether or not the patriarchy exists. In her autobiography, she writes, *"my Marxist outlook pointed out to me with an illuminating clarity that women's liberation could take place only as the result of the victory of a new social order and a different economic system."*<sup>48</sup>

Through examining Kollontai's writing and organizing, it becomes clear that women's liberation relies on two non-negotiable conditions – creating a society where women's delegation to the private realm and subsequent isolation from labor is impossible, and reimagining social

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<sup>46</sup> Kollontai, "On The Social Basis of The Woman Question."

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Kollontai, *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*.

relations between men and women so that women are emancipated from the ownership of men. The former is arguably more common to the Marxist tradition. The latter is unique to Kollontai, who advocates for what she calls Red Love, a comradesly form of love, free of capitalist “romantic” notions of ownership or entitlement over one’s partner. Liberals are skeptical of the necessity for these revolutionary pursuits, often concerned that women’s liberation will take a backseat to class struggle.<sup>49</sup> This is the root of liberal critiques of Kollontai and her theoretical comrades – that they do not extend *The Woman Question* far enough. In Kollontai’s writing and political work, though, we see her center women in both of these projects.

#### *Property Relations & The Issue of the Private Realm*

Perhaps at the heart of Kollontai’s criticism of liberal feminism is the liberal’s failure to adequately confront the issue of the private realm. Unlike the capitalist liberal feminists, Kollontai understood as a Bolshevik the importance of eradicating the private realm to ensure the emancipation of women. Though over time liberal feminists have debated the degree to which the State should interfere with matters of the home, the private realm remains out of the State’s view. It is where man has historically dominated as head of household, a king of his own property. Kollontai’s feminist contemporaries have, using their own methods, identified the private realm as where women are most directly oppressed – they are subjugated, trapped, and forced into care work. They are denied access to the public realm, where decisions are made. Liberal feminists seek to create a space for women in the public sphere as it exists, but Kollontai rejects this goal. For Kollontai, as long as a private realm exists, and as long as capitalism persists, the public will be largely inaccessible to women.

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<sup>49</sup> Tong, 123.

When many women did enter the public sphere in the twentieth century, they simply found themselves double-burdened under capitalism. Though a woman could now perform a “man’s job,” a man still does not perform that of the woman, leaving her to juggle both. Unless “women’s” (domestic) work is nationalized, women entering the workforce will continually be expected to fulfill motherly and wifely duties, on top of their careers.<sup>50</sup> Liberal feminists refer to this as “the second shift,” and promote reforms such as paid paternity leave to encourage fathers to split childrearing and housekeeping duties.

Just as Marxist feminists suspect, though, these reforms still have not produced the intended results. Even today, and in the instances where men actively attempt to be more involved in child raising, families are financially discouraged from doing so. Men’s labor remains valued more than a woman’s – not necessarily because of the work men do, but because they are the ones doing it.<sup>51</sup> If you are trying to raise a family with one working parent, it only makes sense that the higher earner remains the breadwinner. Unfortunately, it is more often than not the case that the woman is underpaid.

Though modern women *appear* to have been granted access to the public realm under capitalism, they are still restricted by housework<sup>52</sup> and the patriarchal nature of the public realm. In order to hold their own in public life, women must unlearn their social roles within the home and conform to the masculine nature of the public realm. For many feminists, this largely contributes to the lack of representation in leadership roles in the workforce and in politics in the West. The United States federal government is severely disproportionately representative of

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<sup>50</sup> Margaret Benston, “The Political Economy of Women’s Liberation,” 1989, republished in *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine*, (New York, September 2019), 8-9.

<sup>51</sup> Kristen Ghodsee, *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism and Other Arguments for Economic Independence*, Bold Type Books, (New York, 2018), 34-5.

<sup>52</sup> V.I. Lenin, *The Woman Question: Selections from the Writings of Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, V.I. Lenin, and Joseph Stalin*, International Publishers, (New York, 1951), 52.

men, never having had a woman president or coming close to proportionately representing women in the U.S. Congress.

The dichotomy between the public and private realms has endured through much of the history of political thought, as it is a canonical feature of political theory that the structure of the polis, and men's position in it, is distinct from the familial unit that exists in the home. Carole Pateman asks whether or not it is possible to consent to your own submission, arguing that it is exclusively men who give birth to the body politic, and in order for women to access it they must willingly submit to a patriarchal society. In *The Disorder of Women*, she writes, "*the fraternal social contract story shows that the categories and practices of civil society cannot simply be universalized to women.*"<sup>53</sup> In other words, the public realm as it exists under capitalism has been designed for men and by men, making it nearly impossible, if at all possible, for women to successfully infiltrate. With no access to the public realm and no other alternative, women remain largely trapped in the private home. Kollontai and her Marxist comrades understand this, and the subsequent urgency of eradicating the private.

The only time in the West that the economy has been able to handle a large-scale addition of women from the private home into the workforce has been in wartime.<sup>54</sup> This should not be terribly surprising. With the mass exodus of working aged men pulled out of the workforce and into the service, there was simply no one else to work. If you grew up in the United States post-World War II, you have seen Rosie the Riveter in schools, on clothing, in household decor. You may even consider her a feminist icon. But, she was not created with the intent of liberating women or improving social relations. Following World War II, women who had taken their

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<sup>53</sup> Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and Political Theory*, Stanford University Press, (1989), 52.

<sup>54</sup> Benston, 7, 9.

husbands' jobs while they were drafted returned to the home to raise a generation of baby boomers. Because of the G.I Bill, they moved out to the suburbs with their husbands and children to clean more square footage of dust and grime and wash, dry, and fold a growing family's worth of laundry. The wife remains under capitalism as Engels observed her, an instrument of reproduction whose labor is never recognized, nor compensated.<sup>55</sup>

Following WWII, there has been progress made in women's representation of the public realm, but this has not resulted in the absence of women from the private home. Contemporary liberal feminists like Sheryl Sandberg try to tell us that if we as women *lean in*, we can be just as successful as men. By leaning in, she is referring to a series of self-help style tips that has become confused with feminism, like "speak your truth" and "make your partner be your partner!"<sup>56</sup> The main idea being that if women assert themselves more in their professional and private lives, they will be taken more seriously by their colleagues, bosses, and husbands, who will treat them as equal partners in business and in the home.<sup>57</sup> Of course, this is a relatively easy case for Sandberg, the CEO of Facebook, to make. *Lean In* and its like-minded feminist supporters have been vastly criticized, mostly famously by bell hooks, who referred to it as a "faux feminist" attempt by a white, wealthy women to minimize the barriers many women experience to and in the workplace.<sup>58</sup>

Even in the instances where women under capitalism are able to work outside of the home full-time, it is often other women that perform the domestic work in their home. The global care chain is a great example of wealthy, often white women outsourcing domestic work to more

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<sup>55</sup> Engels, *The Woman Question: Selections*, 35.

<sup>56</sup> Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing, (2013), Table of Contents.

<sup>57</sup> Sandberg, 10-11.

<sup>58</sup> bell hooks, "Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In," from *Letting Go: Feminist and Social Justice Insight and Activism* by Donna King and Catherine Valentine, *Vanderbilt University Press*, (2015), 229.

marginalized women. The global care chain refers to the pattern of women from developing countries leaving their homes and families to work as a nanny or housekeeper for wealthy families in more developed countries.<sup>59</sup> These women generally live full-time with their employers, seeing their own families only a couple of times a year, and are responsible for raising their employer's children, while they remain separated from their own. They are expected to love, nurture, and care for another woman's child in a way they are prevented from doing so for their own.<sup>60</sup> Though in these instances women *are* compensated for their labor, this sacrifice that they are expected to make is in its own way exploitative.

It is difficult not to hear this and return to Kollontai's concern that the bourgeois woman will turn her back on her gender for the sake of her own class preservation. The answer to Kollontai is not *just* to compensate women for domestic work – mid-twentieth century Marxists like Selma James have proposed wages for housework,<sup>61</sup> for example – but to nationalize domestic work and bring it out of the private home and into the public realm, effectively rendering the private realm nonexistent.

To the liberal feminist, the suggestion of eradicating the private realm is an extremely radical, even utopian idea, as the private/public distinction is the foundation of liberal political theory. For liberal feminists, doing away with the private sphere is definitionally authoritarian.

The early liberals, (e.g., Locke) were writing against political patriarchy – the idea that power flows from the top down, from a hereditary monarch to his subjects. They define political power as the power of a magistrate over his subject, but this power is distinctly different from that of a

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<sup>59</sup> Premilla Nadasen, "Rethinking Care: Arlie Hochschild and the Global Care Chain," *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 3 &4, *The Feminist Press*, (Fall/Winter 2017), 124-5.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Selma James, "I founded the Wages for Housework campaign in 1972 - and women are still working for free," *Independent*, (2020), <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/international-womens-day-wages-housework-care-selma-james-a9385351.html>.



husband over his wife, a father over his children, or a master over his slave.<sup>62</sup> Political power comes from the social contract, which establishes politics and civil society as among the heads of households. political power does not extend or interfere with the power heads of households – husbands, fathers, masters – have over their wives, children, and slaves or servants. John Stuart Mill writes, “*the aim, therefore, of patriots was to set limits to the power which the rule should be suffered to exercise over the community; and this limitation was what they meant by liberty.*”<sup>63</sup>

Freedom and liberty, therefore, exist in the form of the private realm. The private realm exists precisely for men to exercise autonomous power of their lives free from the state’s purview. Without the private realm or a notion of state-recognized privacy, the liberal only sees authoritarianism.

By the latter half of the twentieth century, the language of the ‘private’ and ‘public’ became primarily associated in the West with the legal legitimacy of the State’s jurisdiction over reproductive issues. In *Roe v. Wade*, the majority Justices of the Supreme Court established the right to privacy - a negative freedom which ensures issues regarding one’s own reproductive health and planning remained *free from* interference by the State. Seen as a victory to many liberal feminists, legitimizing the private can actually have negative implications for women’s liberation. The justification for the right to privacy was not that women are entitled to autonomy over their bodies. It was that what happens between a woman, her body, and her partner in the home is out of the State’s purview.

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<sup>62</sup> John Locke, *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, 1689, republished electronically by *Project Gutenberg*, (2010), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7370/7370-h/7370-h.htm>.

<sup>63</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 1859, republished electronically by *Project Gutenberg*, (2011), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34901/34901-h/34901-h.htm>.

“The right to choose” has overtaken “the right to privacy” in discussions surrounding *Roe v. Wade*. This is a false attribution. Upholding *Roe v. Wade* has become a litmus test for liberals when a new seat opens up on the Supreme Court. The conservative opposition to *Roe v. Wade* is misogynistic, and my discussion should not be confused with opposition or indifference to the issue of women’s autonomy as an electoral issue. However, it is hardly radical for a panel of seven (white, male) individuals to regurgitate what predominantly white, predominantly male theorists have been writing for centuries – that a realm exists separate from the public, a realm where the man reigns as ruler over his personal castle to do what he please, free from State intervention or judgment.

Catharine MacKinnon writes on the internal contradictions of feminists championing *Roe v. Wade* as a legal victory, arguing it did little to improve the way women experience sex – “*sex doesn’t look a whole lot like freedom when it [becomes] normatively less costly for women to risk an undesired, often painful, traumatic, dangerous, sometimes illegal and potentially life-threatening procedure than to protect themselves in advance.*”<sup>64</sup> *Roe v. Wade* did not make abortion materially more accessible to most women, and it certainly did not do anything to alleviate the physical risk women take when getting pregnant, nor when getting an abortion. To take this a step further, the Court also failed – or chose not to – address the dangerous sexual situations women are often subjected to.

This ruling reinforces the legitimacy of the private realm by barring state intervention on the matter, even if the intended purpose is protecting women. Though there is a valid critique of privacy from government surveillance, historically, the prioritization of privacy in this regard has been at the negative expense of women’s safety. In the United States, for example, marital rape

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<sup>64</sup> Catharine MacKinnon, “Privacy v. Equality: Beyond *Roe v. Wade*,” from *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*, by Catharine MacKinnon, *Harvard University Press*, (1987), 95.

was not legally recognized until the 1960s, both as a crime and a concept. Still today, due to spousal privilege in legal investigations and trials, it is difficult for women to testify against their husband. Even if this precedent puts the woman's safety in jeopardy, her husband's expectation of privacy supersedes. Issues like domestic violence often become a "he said, she said" scenario, regardless of whether or not there is evidence of abuse. By using the logic of privacy, the Court enabled the inaction taken against battery, rape, and women's exploited labor. The liberal ideal of freedom, MacKinnon argues, suggests that so long as the State does not interfere in personal matters, those matters were autonomous endeavors.<sup>65</sup> This, contrary to the liberal belief, is not the case.

The Soviet Union provides us with one of the few examples of Marxist feminism in action. Unlike the liberals MacKinnon critiques, Kollontai actively campaigned for women's protections. Under the Bolsheviks, divorce became easily attainable for women, paid leave from work was instituted, as well as guaranteed payments to single mothers, and birth control, etc. Abortion was unequivocally legalized in 1920<sup>66</sup> and a nationalized healthcare system broke down barriers women under capitalism historically faced from accessing medical care.

The Bolshevik Revolution brought about a wave of socioeconomic progress for members of the working class. They nationalized domestic work in the form of communal housing, desegregated care centers for children, food and laundry halls, among others. They most notably abolished private property through the 1917 Decree on Land, which sought to redistribute land that was once considered 'private,' among the peasantry – *“all land, whether state, crown, monastery, church, factory, entailed, private, public, peasant, etc., shall be confiscated without*

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<sup>65</sup> MacKinnon, 99.

<sup>66</sup> Katie McElvanney, Women and the Russian Revolution, *British Library* (electronic), <https://www.bl.uk/russian-revolution/articles/women-and-the-russian-revolution>.

*compensation and become the property of the whole people, and pass into the use of all those who cultivate it.*"<sup>67</sup> In abolishing private property and redistributing it directly to the peasantry and working class, the Bolsheviks took an active approach to ensuring the most marginalized would not be trapped in oppressive or exploitative relationships for food and shelter – in most ways, their basic needs were met by the State.

The Soviet Union prided itself on these advancements in social progress. On Angela Davis's famous tour of the Soviet Union she lauded the Soviets for achieving equality for all citizens.<sup>68</sup> The Family Code of 1918 granted women equal status to men, granted illegitimate children the same legal rights as legitimate ones, and reformed the economic relationship between husband and wife.<sup>69</sup> No longer was marriage a legal, economic partnership. In the eyes of the State, individuals who married remained economically independent of one another, easing the potential burden of staying in a marriage for financial security.

This all seems good on paper, though contemporary feminists are not necessarily wrong to be skeptical of how effective these measures were on the ground. Some of these initiatives and reform did succeed in bringing women out of the private home and actively ensuring the same protections to women that men have long been granted by virtue of existing. However, there *were* ways in which these initiatives inherently limited the extent to which women, as women *and as workers*, were liberated. For example, bringing domestic work into the public realm of production and out of the private home allowed women to finally be compensated for the work they performed, providing them with the financial and logistical (e.g., time) resources to work on their own outside of the home, free from the burden of being solely responsible for childbearing

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<sup>67</sup> V.I. Lenin, The Decree on Land, 1917, accessed electronically via *marxists.org*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/25-26/26d.htm>.

<sup>68</sup> *Our Friend Angela*, directed by Yuri Mongolovskiy, *Central Documentary Film Studios*, (Moscow, USSR, 1972).

<sup>69</sup> McElvanney, *Women and the Russian Revolution*.

and housekeeping. Still, these reforms did not succeed in altering the nature of gender relations. In many ways, they extended women's subordination into the public sphere. Labor associated with domestic work was performed largely by women, who were underpaid compared to the male coworkers, and were not as warmly welcomed by said coworkers as some Marxists may make it seem. Although women entered the public realm to work alongside men, men did not reciprocate.<sup>70</sup> Women became more involved in laboring spaces once dominated by men, but men did not partake in jobs centered around childcare or once-domestic work. Though the face of women's subordination was changing, women remained largely subordinated, nonetheless.

Communal childcare halls were successful in nationalizing this domestic work, but factory halls were then, in turn, filled with working women breastfeeding or pumping while on the job.<sup>71</sup> Women's representation in STEM fields and in medicine seemed to increase, though once women became more represented in the field, their work was once again devalued compared to men's.<sup>72</sup> Just as we see in liberal attempts to infiltrate the workforce, men's work was valued more highly simply because it was men doing it.<sup>73</sup> It seems that even if the Bolsheviks were partially successful in easing women's suffering, it was not seen through to the necessary end. This, perhaps, is why Kollontai points to the necessity of revolutionizing social relations in conjunction with abolishing the private realm and the capitalistic family. I will explore Kollontai's proposal for this, which she calls Red Love, in the proceeding section.

Already critical of their Marxist colleagues, liberal feminists were in some ways, they believed, validated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the authoritarianism that later

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<sup>70</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, MIT Press, (2000), 195.

<sup>71</sup> Buck-Morss, 194.

<sup>72</sup> Buck-Morss, 195.

<sup>73</sup> Ghodsee, 35.

evolved from the Bolshevik Revolution, seeing it as validation of their critiques of Marxism feminism. Does this mean, though, that the only responsible recourse is to throw the baby out with the bathwater? To overlook the progress Marxists *did* make for women, among other marginalized groups, much of which was achieved ahead of their liberal critics?

Alain Badiou's *The Communist Hypothesis* offers us an avenue through which we may salvage the progress that was made under Kollontai and the Bolsheviks while taking seriously the factors that led to the Soviet Union's demise. Following the logic of the Communist Hypothesis, the Soviet Union and its decline is not proof that communism doesn't work. Rather, it is a smaller step in seeing communism through to fruition, an opportunity to learn.<sup>74</sup> He writes, "*We know that communism is the right hypothesis. All those who abandon this hypothesis immediately resign themselves to the market economy, to parliamentary democracy—the form of state suited to capitalism—and to the inevitable and 'natural' character of the most monstrous inequalities.*"<sup>75</sup> If the alternative to communism *is* monstrous to the Marxist, it is the job of communists, then, acting as social scientists, to revise their experiment with what they have learned and try again. Communism is the hypothesis, not the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was an experiment in communism.

We must also turn the mirror back around to the liberal who views the decline of the Soviet Union as Marxism's defeat. Liberal feminists, too, have yet to achieve gender equality. Though Western democracy has not yet met the Soviet Union's fate, if Western civilization were to crumble tomorrow, the liberal would have come no closer to women's liberation than the Marxist. Would that mean, then, that the liberal feminists would abandon their mission?

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<sup>74</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, 2008, translated by David Macey and Steve Corcoran, republished by Verso Books, (2010), 6-7.

<sup>75</sup> Badiou, back cover.

Returning to Kollontai specifically: to dismiss her work on the basis that she did not adequately produce women's liberation ignores that her approach is two-fold. Though she made much progress in nationalizing domestic work and emancipating women from the home, her vision for liberation includes a social revolution – in the form of what she calls Red Love - which she was unable to see through due to push back from her party. With this knowledge, we can return to her work today with a fresh set of eyes.

### *Social Revolution: Red Love*

The theory behind Kollontai's vision for social revolution is conveyed best through her fiction writing, where she envisions a new world of social relations between men and her female protagonists. Through these works. Kollontai paints us a picture of what love and sex can look like once they are emancipated from capitalism, and how these new social relations will be to the benefit of women.

In Kollontai's fictional short story "Vasilisa Malygina," protagonist Vasya criticizes her husband Vladimir for being on what she considers to be a slippery slope towards an opulent lifestyle.<sup>76</sup> Vasya, who returns home to her husband from running a communal house in Moscow, is in many ways like Kollontai herself. She is dedicated to the revolutionary cause. Most of the conflict between her and Vladimir throughout the story can be traced back to the tension she feels balancing the obligation that comes with her bourgeois marriage and her insistence that revolutionary politics be reflected in all aspects of social life.

Vladimir is frequently in trouble with the Party under suspicion of conspiring with Anarchists. Vasya is able to speak on his behalf, as she is a well-respected Bolshevik. Because

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<sup>76</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, "Vasilisa Malygina," *Love of Worker Bees*, 1924, translated by Cathy Porter, republished by *Academy Press*, (1978), 65.

she is a well-respected Bolshevik, though, Vladimir's tendencies put her loyalty to him at odds with her loyalty to the Party. She grows to resent him as the story proceeds, becoming increasingly unsure of her love for him. Vladimir mocks her and her radical inclinations repeatedly, pushing them further and further apart. A particularly unnerving moment comes when Vladimir gifts Vasya with new fabric only because he would be embarrassed to be seen out with her in her current garb. Vasya is consistently uncomfortable with the ways in which Vladimir flaunts his wealth. He brags of buying a horse and a car, for example, to which Vasya responds by requesting he sell the horse. She rationalizes that he does not need both, so the additional is a luxury.

Vladimir, though, is largely concerned with his reputation, which remains a point of contention between the two throughout the novel. He expects Vasya to perform her wifely duties in the public eye and is threatened by her independent nature. He wishes for her to be present alongside him and entertain guests and comrades in the manner of one who keeps the home. In many ways it seems, Vladimir, though a Bolshevik in name, wishes for Vasya to assume the bourgeois role of housewife.

These tensions continue to build throughout the story until Vasya is eventually betrayed by Vladimir when she finds out that Vladimir and his mistress, Nina, love one another. Though she has growing suspicions throughout the story – the affair is an open secret – she does not become truly jealous until she suspects that Vladimir and his mistress have a friendship and an emotional connection that she and Vladimir no longer share. As opposed to the dramatic fiction (and nonfiction) of the West, it is not the sex that alarms Vasya. It is that he is emotionally cheating on her that is meant to shock and dismay readers. The sexual affair, rather, is presented almost as a footnote.



After intercepting a letter to Vladimir from his mistress, Vasya accepts that her marriage to Vladimir is over. She writes to Vladimir's mistress Nina suggesting she and Vladimir wed instead, insisting that Vladimir and Nina have a more solid foundation for a loving relationship, even if this comes at the expense of her own marriage. Once she sends the letter, she returns to Moscow to direct a factory and move back into her communal home. There she reveals that she is pregnant, though her opinions on the end of her marriage to Vladimir have not changed. With the help of the communal house residents and the women in her factory, Vasya explains, she will raise a "communist baby."<sup>77</sup> Her and her housemates celebrate.

Though Vasya's marriage ended with the story, it is meant to be a happy ending. Vladimir and Nina found a love based in friendship, shared values, and respect, while Vasya rediscovered her sense of purpose. She embodies the single woman Kollontai imagines in her ideal society – a communist woman who, though she relies on the aid and love of others, is now free to create the life she wants for her and her child. Though Kollontai's conception of love is criticized as being too radical, Vasya is a relatable character, and she is one worth rooting for. Though there are moments where, as a reader who's dated men, I want to reach into the book and shake her, she is no more or less rational or self-righteous than your typical protagonist. In making Vasya so relatable, Kollontai is signaling to readers that this new woman already exists. As women we are already capable of attaining the same freedom as Vasya – the question is not, "can this liberated woman exist?" Rather, it is, "how can we prepare the world for her?"

The demise of Vladimir and Vasya's relationship can be attributed to an absence of what Kollontai calls 'red love' or 'comradely love.' Red Love is her alternative to romantic love under capitalism, which she attributes to the subordination of women, referring to marriage as a

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<sup>77</sup> Kollontai, *Love of Worker Bees*, 181.

“trap”<sup>78</sup> women are forced into that to ensure their continued subordination. Michael Hardt refers to the love Kollontai is criticizing as ‘property love,’ where familial and romantic bonds are based in the logic of property relations.<sup>79</sup>

Kollontai recognizes we cannot separate sexuality from socioeconomic class – romantic love as we understand it under capitalism depends on bourgeois notions of sexuality and desire:

*“It is the bourgeoisie who have carefully tended and fostered the ideal of absolute possession of the ‘contracted partner’s’ emotional as well as physical ‘I’, thus extending the concept of property rights to include the right to the other person’s whole spiritual and emotional world.”*<sup>80</sup>

Love under capitalism requires us to surrender every aspect of ourselves to our partner, we forfeit ownership over our own mind and body. Though in love legal property designations are not involved, we conceive intimate bonds with one another using the logic of property relations and possessions. Romantic love exists as a property relation.<sup>81</sup> When we commit to being in a relationship with someone, we echo cliches like “*I’m yours*,” and “be **mine**.” In popular music we constantly hear songs with lyrics along the lines of “*you belong to me*,” we use phrases like “off the market” to designate that someone is no longer available to start a new relationship. Just as Marx predicted, property relations have become so deeply embedded in our society that it seems we don’t know how to think about things without them.

The end goal for a relationship under capitalism is marriage. The State incentivizes individuals to marry through economic benefits. If a married couple files their taxes jointly – as one filer, one individual – they receive benefits not available to single filers. The State also incentivized couples to stay married using the threat of financial penalties such as alimony and

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<sup>78</sup> Michael Hardt, “Red Love,” from *Red Love: A Reader on Alexandra Kollontai*, edited by Maria Lind, Michele Masucci, and Joanna Warza of CuratorLab, Sternberg Press, (2017), 63.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, *Red Love*, from *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, edited and translated by Alix Holt, Norton, (New York, 1977), 242.

<sup>81</sup> Hardt, 63.

child support. Individuals become a ‘completed couple,’ where each half complements one another so perfectly they no longer require anything from outside society and where the sum is worth more than its parts. This is a major concern for Kollontai. In the eyes of the State, the couple exists as an individual – self-sufficient, unified, acting in their combined best interest instead of their individual needs and desires. “*Men and women seek each other in the hope of finding for themselves, through another person, a means to a larger share of spiritual and physical pleasure. It makes no difference whether they are married to the partner or not they give little thought to what’s going on in the other person, to what’s happening to their emotions and psychological processes,*” she writes in *Sexual Relations and Class Struggle*.<sup>82</sup>

For most of history, and for many marginalized groups to this day, the similarities between property relations and marriage are quite visible. The woman in the capitalist family is both a commodity and a laborer. She belongs to her husband and exists in the private realm and anti-social family as his property, coming into his possession as a deal between her husband and her father. Both men are incentivized to commit this exchange – the husband to gain a body to fulfill his physical desires, raise his children, and clean his home, without compensation of course. The father, then, gains a new level of financial security: he no longer has to provide for his daughter or worry about whether the family will be provided for. Being bought and sold via dowry between father and husband is perhaps the most visible form of the commodification of women, and through it we can see more clearly how women’s oppression under capitalism looks different than men’s.

Though in most of the Western world, the dowry is considered an antiquated practice, the sentiment remains today. Marriage continues to be one of the most attainable forms of class

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<sup>82</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, “Sexual Relations and Class Struggle,” 1921, translated by Alix Holt (1972) and republished by *marxists.org*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1921/sex-class-struggle.htm>.

mobility. Modern practices like prenuptial agreements, the act of a father “giving” his daughter away down the aisle, or even the common practice of asking a woman’s parent(s) for permission to propose all reinforce this rooted belief that a daughter is in some way owned by her father, waiting to be sent off to another man who has been deemed acceptable.

A trope in historical literature and film involves young women (girls) being married off to wealthier men in the hopes of improving her and her family’s social and financial statuses. Unfortunately, in these sorts of stories, much as in reality, the woman’s life becomes collateral damage in the larger class struggle. Kollontai herself began to question the transactional nature of marriage when her older sister was married off to a man over forty years her senior to preserve her socioeconomic status. Kollontai did not want the same fate for herself and insisted she marry for love, not money. Thus, she left her arranged marriage for the man whom she truly loved. According to Kristen Ghodsee, women in socialist countries are less likely to buy into fairytale tropes Prince Charming will sweep them off their feet and make all their dreams come true.<sup>83</sup> Without the existential fear that they will be rendered destitute without a man, women are more likely to act out of love. It is important to note, though, that at the time Kollontai is coming of age, she is the exception and not the rule. Whether it was due to a lack of financial independence for working class women, or the conservative social constraints, many women did marry for money and stability, and it seldom was a fairytale. “*I’ve read enough novels to know just how much time and energy it takes to fall in love and I just don’t have time,*” Kollontai writes.<sup>84</sup>

*Jane Eyre* is taught in high schools throughout the United States as an empowering liberal coming of age novel for women. Charlotte Bronte takes us through the life of Jane from childhood to adulthood. Bronte has been credited as the first “historian of the private

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<sup>83</sup> Ghodsee, 18.

<sup>84</sup> Condit, “Alexandra Kollontai.”

consciousness,” for her character development of Jane, and the novel has subsequently been referred to as ahead of its time and as having progressive feminist, sexual, and class undertones. Bronte has been ranked as one of the top literary novelists of all time.<sup>85</sup> The novel is described as a conflict between love and duty – in her struggle for independence, Jane grapples with what society expects of her versus she wants for herself.<sup>86</sup>

Throughout the novel, Jane goes from being middle class to homeless to upper class when she finds her way to Mr. Rochester. Once readers are introduced to him, it becomes clear his relationship to Jane is complicated. He initially hires her as a governess and treats her as such – Jane is expected to respect him as the master of the house. Jane maintains throughout the novel that she is an independent woman, she insists that she is working to become financially independent. At one point in the novel, Jane saves Mr. Rochester from a fire, changing the nature of her feelings for him.<sup>87</sup> Soon after, Mr. Rochester begins a relationship with another woman, Blanche Ingham. Jane finds herself feeling jealous and is called home to care for her dying aunt. When she returns to Mr. Rochester reveals that he is also falling in love with her and proposes marriage.

When preparing for the wedding, a series of disturbing events ensue, and it is soon revealed that Mr. Rochester keeps his first wife imprisoned in his attic because she is mentally ill. It feels like low-hanging fruit, really. A ‘master of the house’ keeping his wife chained up in the attic because she cannot fulfill his emotional and physical needs. Mr. Rochester tells Jane his father tricked him into the marriage, that the marriage was not founded on love or desire.<sup>88</sup> Jane is

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<sup>85</sup> Daniel S. Burt, *The Literature 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Novelists, Playwrights, and Poets of All Time*, Infobase Publishing (2008), 224.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*, 1897, republished electronically by David Price, *Project Gutenberg*, (1998, updated 2020), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1260/1260-h/1260-h.htm>.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

rightfully devastated and, in what comes as a break with traditional gender norms, Jane leaves Mr. Rochester and later finds out she inherited a substantial amount of money from a dead uncle. In another break with traditional gender norms, Jane is now independently financially secure. Unfortunately, the novel does not end there.

The first time I read “*Reader, I married him,*”<sup>89</sup> I sighed with a familiar disappointment. Mr. Rochester has given even her worst enemy all the reason to insist Jane call it off. But, after finding out Mr. Rochester nearly died when his imprisoned wife, whom he *literally imprisoned*, tried to set the house on fire, Jane realizes she loves him and makes what we are taught is a radical, autonomous choice to give him a second chance. Girl power, I guess.

Contrast these stories to the historical fiction from Kollontai, who writes about women in her ideal post-revolutionary Russia. Quite distinct from the stories where women are depicted and treated as men’s property or a shiny object they can use to enhance or preserve their social status, the women Kollontai write about are independent and empowered, their agency is widely accepted and honored, they are sure of what they want and unburdened by capitalist barriers from getting it. Her characters are sexually liberated, in line with her political views on love and sex, and marriage is less about entitlement or ownership over one another. Nor is it tied to sex and reproduction. Rather, marriage is reserved for those who share a comradely love and mutual appreciation. Remember Vladimir and Vasya divorce not because of sexual infidelity or financial insecurity, but because Vasya feels she and Vladimir are no longer socially bonded. They no longer share the same values, interests, or social experiences. For Kollontai, one should not marry to claim ownership over the one you love, whether it be sexual, emotional, or financial.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

Kollontai discusses her criticism of love and vision for a more radical, liberatory alternative in “Make Way for Winged Eros,” which she published in *Molodoya Gvardiya*, an underground anti-fascist journal. The article was denounced by the Soviet press: “Comrade Kollontai was always wont to swim in a sea of hackneyed and banal phrases diluted merely with a sickly-sweet sentimentality.”<sup>90</sup> ‘Winged Eros,’ as she often uses to refer to her politics on the subject, is a direct contrast to ‘wingless eros’ – the “purely biological” tendency of the working class to engage in cursory, fleeting sexual relationships.<sup>91</sup> Love as Winged Eros is based in camaraderie, it is a working class return to all love’s joys and pains, interwoven with all aspects of our emotional life. She traces the rise of Wingless Eros to times of uncertainty and revolution – “Wingless Eros does not make one suffer from sleepless nights, does not sap one’s will, and does not entangle the rational workings of the mind,”<sup>92</sup> she writes, observing that following 1917, the working class was entering a period of relative calm and could now handle the psychological and emotional demands of engaging in meaningful relationships. Not only that, but as the working class becomes more socially and economically fulfilled under communism, Wingless Eros will no longer satisfy one’s psychological needs. Instead, we must turn to “new facets of emotion which possess unprecedented beauty, strength and radiance.”<sup>93</sup>

In “Three Generations” from *Love of Worker Bees*, a teenage girl speaking to the narrator, who we are to believe is Kollontai or a Kollontai-esque figure, shares personal information regarding sexual encounters she has had with her mother’s partner (and her stepfather), Andrei. Genuinely perplexed as to why her mother would take these encounters personally (*Well I*

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<sup>90</sup> Hannah Proctor, “Revolutionary Romance,” *Jacobin Magazine*, 2019, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/02/russian-revolution-love-kollontai-luxemburg>.

<sup>91</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, “Make Way for Winged Eros: A Letter To Working Youth,” *Molodoya Gvardiya* (1923), translated by Alix Holt and transcribed by Joey Ostos, republished by *marxists.org*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1923/winged-eros.htm>.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

*didn't think it concerned her*, she tells the narrator) or why her sleeping with multiple men would be considered taboo, she explains there is no love between herself and Andrei, insisting they both care only about her mother and not each other. Not until she realizes her mother feels betrayed by the encounters does she begin to show any sign of remorse or guilt. Previously unaware that her mother felt she was trying to take Andrei away from her, she explains that the affair has nothing to do with emotions and that Andrei, for all intents and purposes, is disposable to her.<sup>94</sup>

*"She's not at all upset by the fact that I'm friends with Andrei, that he talks to me more than her,"* she points out to the narrator,<sup>95</sup> confused as to why that does not upset her mother, but that they had sex does. If her and Andrei were home together and hungry, they would share a meal or snack. If they both were craving intellectual stimulation, they may choose to read together or engage in lively debate. If they were thirsty, they may share a drink. If they were together and both desired sex, what makes that urge, also a physiological one, any different?

Though Kollontai did not coin it herself, her conceptualization of sex has in part become associated with the Glass of Water Theory. According to the theory, sex should be unproblematic. In a communist society satisfying sexual desire and the craving for love should be as simple and trivial as drinking a glass of water. Accused of being too radical and advocating for 'free love,' her views on sex were partly responsible for being ostracized by the Party. In an interview with Clara Zetkin, Lenin publicly expresses frustration with this radical approach to sex politics:

*"I consider the famous 'glass-of-water' theory as completely un-Marxist and, moreover, as anti-social. It is not only what nature has given but also what has become culture, whether of a high or low level, that comes into play in sexual life.*

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<sup>94</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, "Three Generations," 1924, translated by Cathy Porter, republished by *Academy Press*, (1978), 208.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*



*Engels pointed out in his Origin of the Family how significant it was that the common sexual relations had developed into individual sex love and thus became purer. The relations between the sexes are not simply the expression of a mutual influence between economics and a physical want deliberately singled out for physiological examination. It would be rationalism and not Marxism to attempt to refer the change in these relations directly to the economic basis of society in isolation from its connection with the ideology as a whole. To be sure, thirst has to be quenched. But would a normal person normally lie down in the gutter and drink from a puddle? Or even from a glass whose edge has been greased by many lips? But the social aspect is more important than anything else. The drinking of water is really an individual matter. But it takes two people to make love, and a third person, a new life, is likely to come into being. This deed has a social complexion and constitutes a duty to the commune.”<sup>96</sup>*

Lenin goes so far to suggest the theory has had fatal ramifications for Soviet youth, who he also perceives as being the most attracted to it. He does admit during the interview, “*I am an old man. I don’t like it.*”<sup>97</sup> For Lenin, this kind of emancipatory love is not emancipatory at all.

By transforming sex into a mundane, habitual task, it becomes more about individual action and gratification. If sex is a social act, Lenin criticizes, the comparison to drinking water doesn’t hold – taking a swig of our drink to quench our thirst is a solitary act. Though we can do it in the company of others, the thirst we experience, the decision to take our glass in our hand, raise it to our lips, and sip is a solitary one. Sex, unless it is masturbatory, involves a partner, making it a social act.

Kollontai’s character Vladimir, likely inspired by Lenin and Kollontai’s other comrades, is presented to the reader as similarly distressed by Vasya’s radical social politics. He admires Vasya’s commitment to the Bolshevik cause in many regards, but throughout the story expresses confusion or disdain regarding just how radical and independent he perceives Vasya

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<sup>96</sup> Clara Zetkin, “Lenin on the Women’s Question: An Interview with Lenin on The Woman Question,” *International Publishers* (1920), transcribed by Sally Ryan and republished by *marxists.org*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1925/lenin/zetkin2.htm>.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

to be. He simply does not comprehend why Vasya is so vehemently opposed to the more traditional, sometimes opulent, aspects of their married life.

For the purpose of this discussion, what is most important is the way in which Kollontai's radical sex politics is essential to her larger project. This social revolution regarding how we conceptualize love and sex is necessary for women's liberation. "*Social and economic changes,*" to Kollontai, create conditions "*that demand and give rise to a new basis for psychological experience*" and "*change all our ideas about the role of women in social life and undermine the sexual morality of the bourgeoisie.*"<sup>98</sup> Oppressive socioeconomic conditions that subordinate women are reproduced through traditional sexual relations. If we are serious about women's emancipation, therefore, we need to establish a new 'proletarian morality' that is free from bourgeois notions of sex and property relations. This morality must contain three basic principles: (1) Equality in relationships, (2) Mutual recognition of the rights of the other, – one does not own the heart, mind, nor soul of the other, and (3) Comradely sensitivity, which she defines as, "the ability to listen and understand the inner workings of the loved person" – bourgeois culture demands this exclusively from the woman, but never required the man to reciprocate equally.<sup>99</sup>

Just as Kollontai faced skeptics and critics, her characters do as well. Kollontai does an impressive job using her secondary characters, whether in an act of self-criticism or an attempt to proactively address potential criticisms, to interrogate her radical notions of love and politics. Earlier in "Three Generations", the narrator meets with the aforementioned mother. As the mother recounts her days as a young woman, and the ways in which her views regarding love compared to her own mother's, Kollontai's motivation becomes clear. She is trying to

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<sup>98</sup> Kollontai, *Selected Writings*, 246.

<sup>99</sup> Kollontai, *Selected Writings*, 291.

demonstrate how morals, though we often treat them as objective universal truths, are constantly changing. The mother is inclined to judge her daughter – how could she have sex with someone she does not love? Someone her own mother married? She challenges this radical view of sex – that instead of it being an emotional gesture, it is instead a mundane habitual task. The daughter is painted as a radical in the process, whose lifestyle is foreign to her mother, much like Kollontai among her peers.

It should not go unnoticed to a reader of Kollontai that the daughter and mother in the story resemble Kollontai's relationship to her own. Her mother, who broke tradition and left an arranged marriage – with her children – to pursue a greater love, disapproved of Kollontai for her choice to do the same.

We see through Kollontai's fiction that she is very much conscious of how radical her ideas are, or at least how radical they are perceived by her Party. Kollontai only served as People's Commissar for one year under Lenin. In 1920, she sided with the Worker's Opposition, critical of what she considered to be undemocratic bureaucracy weakening the Party. For this, she risked expulsion from the Party and was consequently relegated to a series of diplomatic posts that kept her out of Moscow.

What would Red Love look like in 2021, in the era of #MeToo, where liberals are interrogating sociosexual relations between men and women? What would power dynamics look like in a society not burdened by the class system? These are questions worth considering as we reclaim Kollontai's political writing and work and bring it into the twenty-first century. Though I don't necessarily have the answers myself, I offer some thoughts about where we may start.

How do we rework consent after rejecting a liberal politics? What do power dynamics between individuals, and between individuals and the State, look like when power relations have

been reinvented? Who has the power in sex? Is there still an inherent power dynamic in sex in a classless society? There is that commonly used Oscar Wilde quote: “*Everything is about sex. Except sex, which is about power.*” What happens to sex and to power if we were to disconnect the two? Kollontai provides us an answer for what sex will look like, and perhaps she indirectly answers how power will be rearranged. But we cannot talk about power and sex without also talking about consent, especially when discussing women’s liberation and the improved living conditions of women.

Kollontai describes Red Love as inherently consensual, though she doesn’t define consent. Missing throughout her work is a discussion of the individual power dynamics between men and women. She often paints proletarian men as comrades to women’s struggle, appealing to them as allies in the movement, though we know from accounts of women in factories that men were not particularly welcoming to women joining the workforce en masse, nor was the average man calling for Kollontai’s revolutionized social relations.

Though she insists her Red Love is inherently consensual, there are uncomfortable moments in her fictional stories that she tries to sell as healthy displays of sexual desire. For example, in “Three Generations”, though her initial goal to challenge the mother to reflect on how she broke tradition from her mother to better understand why her own daughter is now doing the same to her is clear, the relationship between the daughter and Andrei, her stepfather, still doesn’t sit quite right. Can a young woman, who we are to believe is a teenager in the story, consent to sex with someone who is in her life as a father-figure? It is not the notion of free love that is uncomfortable to the reader, it is Andrei’s role in her life that makes their sexual relationship unsettling.

Our notions of consent in the West are primarily liberal ones, so it is difficult to imagine what sexual consent would look like under a new framework. Consent as we understand it in the West takes us back to the issue of the private realm. Consent, for liberals, rests on the notion that interpersonal relations exist in private, though as Kollontai argues, sex and love are inherently social acts.<sup>100</sup> Liberal proponents of marriage equality, for example, often frame the issue using some iteration of, “what happens between two consenting adults is not the business of the State.” Once again reinforcing the private, liberals identify consent between adults as all that is necessary to justify privacy. If there is not consent, as in the instances of sexual assault or rape, then and only then is what happens between two people sexually considered a criminal matter or an issue for the State.

With the rise of #MeToo, we see how this is largely insufficient in accounting for power dynamics. Can an employee truly consent to sex with an employer if the employer holds some form of political power over them? Here we are left with the same questions as we have with Kollontai, though her characters' relationships are not relegated to the private realm.

It seems the major question, then, is what does consent look like without a private realm? Kollontai envisions a world beyond the private but does not provide us with her own definition of consent. Instead, we are left with some reasonable relationships, but also power dynamics we don't instinctively understand.

Kollontai's Red Love may not be fully formed, but it has also existed entirely in theory and fiction due to societal taboos about sex. It has never had an opportunity to exist in practice. There is something aspirational about it, though – to consider what love could look like without capitalist pressure to give ourselves over to someone entirely, to maintain part of ourselves while

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<sup>100</sup> Kollontai, *Selected Writings*, 278-9.

also loving someone else. Though it may seem utopian, that is only because we have not known love any other way than we do now. It is liberating, at least to me, to consider a world of comradesly love, where our partners are in our lives not because of any other mitigating circumstance, but because that is where they want to be. There is no ownership over one another, no societal expectations or roles to fill, no economic obligations, just each other.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

The liberal and the Marxist feminist are both interested in class, though the Marxist may be the only one who says it. Just as the liberal critiques Marxists like Kollontai of privileging their class over their gender, the Marxist recognizes how liberal feminists, descendants of the bourgeois suffragettes Kollontai criticize, do not separate their class interests from their commitment to women's liberation. Marxist feminists make a compelling case that the private home is the social location where women are the most oppressed. Though liberal feminists believe capitalism is not inherently responsible for women's oppression, they acknowledge how capitalism intensifies it. With this knowledge, calling for anything short of revolution is placing conditions on women's liberation.

The primary liberal critique of Kollontai would be that she does not extend *The Woman Question* far enough, yet all of her work centers the conditions and experiences of women. She organized and educated women, established the Zhenotdel, a branch of government dedicated specifically to women's issues, though she does not identify as a feminist, she writes what we consider today to be feminist theory. She did not receive a formal education. She was not writing in or for the academy; instead, the average working-class women she was trying to organize. All her fictional protagonists are women. It seems her motivation for organizing in class struggle

was to advocate for the most marginalized, exploited women in society. How, then, could Kollontai have deprioritized women?

Even if you are not convinced Kollontai adequately addresses The Woman Question, there is a critique of The Woman Question to be made.

The Woman Question is in many ways an antiquated project. As I discussed earlier, the shape it takes now is nearly unrecognizable from its earlier form. For most of its history, it seems engaging with The Woman Question, in many ways, merely meant... talking about women. As thinkers, primarily women, began theorizing about how to improve women's conditions, The Woman Question evolved, becoming institutionalized in a way. As The Woman Question became a methodological pursuit in the academy, I believe it became less accessible.

For feminist theorists in the academy, identifying the root cause of gender oppression is the first step in eradicating it. This, I believe, is a futile mission. Identifying the cause of gender oppression matters less than identifying the mechanism through which this oppression is reproduced and abolishing whatever that mechanism may be. Whether or not the initial root of gender oppression and the current mechanism through which it is most reproduced are the same things, is irrelevant. Interrogating women's current material conditions and how they continue to experience oppression will bring us significantly closer to improving those conditions.

Our society's understanding of gender is progressing exponentially. What it means to be a woman today is different than what it meant twenty years ago, or even five. We are becoming more inclusive to different gender identities and evolving beyond traditional gender stereotypes. To be a woman no longer means to dress or act or look a certain way. These are all good things, though they make The Woman Question a difficult question to engage with. What does it mean for something to be a "woman's issue" when the political category of woman is becoming a

vaguer and vaguer descriptor? If something is not the concern of a white, middle class woman, does that mean it is not a woman's issue? Who, exactly, *is* the 'woman' in The Woman Question?

Over time, identity categories like gender have evolved – the concept of a “woman's” body as opposed to a male's did not even exist until the nineteenth century.<sup>101</sup> Gender has been recreated throughout history, making the initial cause of women's subordination difficult, if even possible, to pinpoint. Those truly concerned with bringing women's liberation out of academic journals and online think pieces and into reality would be of better use working to identify how gender oppression is being reproduced now, today, than debating the singular causes of women's oppression or creating an exact definition of patriarchy.

Alexandra Kollontai is a useful figure to turn to as we, feminist theorists, collectively work towards women's liberation. What is often criticized as being her weakness – her unwillingness to compromise her radical class politics in her quest for women's liberation – is, instead, one of her strengths. Far from subjugating women's issues to the backburner, Kollontai places women and women's experiences at the front of her theory and activism. She fills in the missing link for those who are unsatisfied with liberal feminism. If we were to look at women's experiences only through the lens of their gender, we would be missing a lot of important information. Though it may be an inconvenient truth for the liberal feminist, capitalism is largely responsible for reproducing women's oppression. If liberal feminists are serious about setting aside class for the greater good of women, it is long overdue that they heed their own advice.

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<sup>101</sup> Jamie Warren, “The Woman Question: A study of women in the world and their place in it.”



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