

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

Wendy Z. Goldman

University of Pennsylvania

A Bolshevik woman and Soviet activist by the name of Gureyeva spoke against the family wage before the All-Union Congress of Working and Peasant Women in 1927: “What gives us, women, the basis of equal rights, what strengthens our independence? Our independent wage. All we women know that a separate wage gives us our own position of independence and forces those around us to treat us as an equal member of society and the family.”¹ Gureyeva and other Bolshevik activists worked within the tradition of Marx, Engels, August Bebel, and Klara Zetkin to transform the lives of Soviet women. They would have been astonished to learn from Harold Benenson [ILWCH, Spring 1984, pp. 1–23] that Marx and Engels abandoned an emphasis on “social transformation” and “changing family arrangements” (1), marginalizing the “problems of women’s oppression and family change in the socialist critique.” (18)

According to Benenson, Marx “implicitly supported working men’s demands for a ‘family maintenance’ standard of wage earning” (16) at the expense of working women. Yet Marx and Engels never supported the family wage, for the notion sharply contradicted their analysis of women’s role in production. They saw women’s increasing participation in the labor force as an *inevitable* consequence of capitalist development that would eventually lay the foundations for women’s emancipation. Marx wrote: “However terrible and disgusting the dissolution of the old family ties within the capitalist system may appear, large scale industry, by assigning an important part in the socially organized processes of production outside the sphere of the domestic economy to women . . . does nevertheless create a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and relations between the sexes.”² Marx and Engels insisted that women would not be freed from male domination until they had access to an independent wage. Engels wrote: “The first condition for the liberation of the wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public industry . . .”³

This analysis did not, however, prevent Marx and Engels from criticizing the destructive effects of factory labor on women and their families. Benenson’s error is to confuse their caustic critique of women’s exploitation with a strategy for liberation. Klara Zetkin, German socialist and Marxist, understood the distinction: she correctly noted that if employers tended to use cheaper female labor instead of male, the remedy was not to demand that women withdraw from the labor force, but to

demand equal pay for equal work. This demand, not the family wage, was the legacy of Marx.

Benenson moreover fails to place workingmen's demand for the family wage within its proper historical context. Secure within the feminism of an affluent society, Benenson pronounces the trade unions and male wage earners "sexist." Yet was it merely "sexism" that prompted working class men to want to remove their wives and children from the factories? Engels wrote of the horrors of women who worked twelve to thirteen hour days: terrified of losing their jobs, they gave birth "in the factory among the machinery."⁴ Who tended these children born among the machines? Working class men and women alike understood the women's labor at home, in the absence of daycare facilities, food, laundry, and other support services, was crucial to the very survival of all family members. There is a subtle sexism in Benenson's pronouncements, an assumption that somehow women's work within the household was neither necessary nor significant.

Benenson ignores the firm emphasis Marx and Engels placed on the need to socialize housework. Just as capitalism inexorably drew ever greater numbers of women into production outside the home, it also unleashed new forms of power and technology which made the socialization of housework possible. Marx believed that "the setting up of a communal domestic economy" presupposed the development and dissemination of machinery.⁵ Benenson not only fails to recognize the importance of housework, he fails to appreciate this fundamental insight into the historical process of women's liberation.

The program outlined by Marx and Engels was to liberate women from the household, provide access to an independent wage, and socialize household production and childcare. When the Bolsheviks seized state power in 1917 there followed a moment of truth for Marxist thought on the "Woman Question." Drawing on Marx, Engels, Bebel and other socialist thinkers, Soviet jurists and activists developed and implemented the most progressive feminist legislation the world had ever seen. They abolished illegitimacy, established divorce at the request of either party, gave legal recognition to cohabitation, and envisioned the ultimate abolition of marriage. They legalized abortion, created daycare and social services, experimented with the socialization of housework, recognizing it as socially necessary labor. Yakov Brandenburgsky, a Bolshevik jurist, told his law students in 1926: "we are undoubtedly moving toward the social upbringing of children, to public education, to the broadest social care at the government's expense. If we now preserve the obligations of mutual support within the family it is only because the government cannot yet replace the family . . ."⁶

This was the Marxist tradition: an analysis of women's position both within and outside the domestic economy; attention to the material constraints on working class women's lives; and a practical program to abolish the social dimensions of women's oppression and transform the family. Stalinism and McCarthyism have separated us from this rich political legacy: just as the revolutionary heritage of the twenties remains unknown to many Soviet citizens, much of the history and theory

of the left is still hidden from Americans. Benenson only perpetuates this crippling ignorance if his misconceptions encourage feminists to dismiss the Marxist tradition without ever fully examining it.

NOTES

1. *Vsesoiuznyi s'ezd rabotnits i krestianok stenograficheskii otchet* (Moskva, 1927), 276.
2. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, (New York, 1977), I, 620–621.
3. Frederick Engels, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York, 1972), 138.
4. Frederick Engels, "The Condition of the Working Class in England," in Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (London, 1975), IV, 452.
5. Karl Marx, "The German Ideology," in Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1969), I, 63–64.
6. Yakov Brandenburgsky, *Kurs semeino-branchnogo prava* (Moskva, 1928), 20.