



MARX, ENGELS, AND THE ABOLITION OF THE FAMILY

RICHARD WEIKART*

'It is a peculiar fact' stated Engels a few months after Marx died, 'that with every great revolutionary movement the question of 'free love' comes to the foreground'.¹ By the mid- to late-nineteenth century it was clear to advocates and opponents alike that many socialists shared a propensity to reject the institution of the family in favour of 'free love', if not in practice, at least as an ideal. The Prussian and German Reich governments tried to muzzle the socialist threat to the family by drafting legislation in 1849, 1874, 1876 and 1894, outlawing, among other things, assaults on the family.² However, the Anti-Socialist Law that Bismarck managed to pass in 1878 contained no mention of the family.

The Utopian Socialists Charles Fourier and Robert Owen had preceded Marx and Engels in their rejection of traditional family relationships, and many nineteenth-century leftists followed their cue. The most famous political leader of the German socialists, August Bebel—though he was a staunch Marxist—wrote his immensely popular book, *Die Frau und der Sozialismus*, under the influence of Fourier's ideas. However, not all socialists in the nineteenth century were anti-family. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who wielded great influence in French socialist and anarchist circles, wanted to retain the family institution, which he loved and revered. The anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, while jettisoning most of the traditional family ties dear to Proudhon, nevertheless thought that a voluntary 'natural family' unit consisting of a man, a woman, and their children, would emerge to replace the extant legal family.

Although Marx and Engels were not the instigators of the anti-family trend among socialists, they—especially Engels—contributed mightily to it. A Prussian agent reported back to Marx's brother-in-law, the Prussian Minister of the Interior, that the German communists in London, with which Marx was associated, were 'so unusually dangerous for the state, the family and the social order'.³ Engels thrust the issue into the foreground shortly after Marx's death by publishing *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), a work that, according to Engels, Marx had wanted to write and that reflected Marx's views. In 1895 Clara Zetkin, a leader of the socialist women's movement in Germany, praised this work as 'of the most fundamental importance for the struggle for liberation of the entire female sex'.⁴ Not only did Engels' book exert influence in the late-nineteenth century, but it has enjoyed a renaissance among contemporary socialists and feminists, though it has probably received as much criticism as praise, even among socialist feminists.

Although there were no doubts in the minds of Marx's and Engels' contemporaries that socialism was a threat not only to the state, but also to the family, some recent commentators on Marx's and Engels' view of the family cast

*Department of History, California State University, Stanislaus, Turlock, CA 95382, U.S.A.

doubt on their radicalism. Some construe their attacks on the family as a call for reform, as an expression of a desire to sweep away abuses, while retaining the basic family structure intact.⁵ Others discover in Engels' writings on the family naturalistic elements that allegedly vitiate his radical pronouncements on the abolition of the family.⁶ Finally, some see a contradiction between Marx's own family life and the ideals he promoted.

These interpretations of Marx's and Engels' position on the family, while often raising important points, tend to obscure somewhat the radicalism of their views. Marx's and Engels' critique of the family consisted of three main elements: (1) a depiction of the hypocrisy and inhumanity of the contemporary bourgeois family; (2) the historicisation of the family, i.e. a historical account of the origins and development of the family in the past; and (3) a vision of the future 'family' in communist society. While Marx once alluded to a higher form of the family in communist society, he and Engels usually wrote about the destruction, dissolution, and abolition of the family. The relationships they envisaged for communist society would have little or no resemblance to the family as it existed in nineteenth-century Europe or indeed anywhere else. Thus it is certainly appropriate to define their position as the abolition of the family. Only by making the term family almost infinitely elastic can they be said to have embraced merely a reformulation of the family.

As a political radical and Left Hegelian before his exposure to communist ideas in 1843–1844, Marx's view of the family was much more conventional than it would be later. In an 1842 article on the newly proposed divorce law for Prussia, he upheld the Hegelian position on marriage, which affirmed it as a moral institution. However, as a staunch opponent of Frederick William IV's attempt to establish a 'Christian state' in Prussia, he rejected the Prussian law's recognition of marriage as a religious institution.⁷ Marx argued that in its essence marriage is indissoluble, though in reality it does sometimes die. Therefore divorce should be granted at times, but instead of being arbitrary, it must simply reflect the moribund state of the marriage. Thus in 1842 Marx was certainly no proponent of easy divorce and the abolition of the family.⁸

Marx's first significant exposure to the concept of the abolition of the family probably came during his stay in Paris in 1843–1844, when he first imbibed communist ideas and held long discussions with numerous socialists and other radicals who congregated in the French capital. Charles Fourier's ideas played a significant role in the socialist movement in France in the 1830s and 1840s and his ideas on the family were propagated in the first volume of the *Oeuvres Complètes* published in 1841. Fourier advocated the replacement of monogamous marriage with a system allowing much greater latitude for sexual passions, since he believed that monogamy was an institution contrary to human nature and was thus an impediment to human happiness. He also proposed that children be raised communally, so society would be one, big, harmonious family rather than fractured into competitive, squabbling family units.⁹

Although Marx had little use for many of Fourier's ideas (indeed Fourier's own disciples were somewhat selective in their adoption of their visionary leader's proposals), they forced him to grapple with the issue of the family and provided him with ammunition with which to criticise present institutions. In *The German Ideology* (1845–1846) Marx and Engels showed their acquaintance with

Fourier's critique of marriage by defending Fourier against an alleged misinterpretation of Karl Grün. However, Marx and Engels were probably just as mistaken as Grün in their interpretation of Fourier.¹⁰ Fourier's ideas remained with Marx even after he wrote *Capital*, since he alluded to a Fourierian principle concerning women's position in society in a letter written in 1868 and toward the end of his life referred to Fourier in his notes on Morgan's *Ancient Society*.¹¹ In another passage in *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels asserted that both French and English socialists were pressing for the dissolution of the family.¹² This implies some knowledge, however cursory it may have been, of Robert Owen's disdain for the family as an institution, since he was the foremost English socialist to attack the family.¹³

There is no doubt that Engels' understanding of family relationships was strongly influenced by Fourier and Owen.¹⁴ In *Anti-Dühring*, which was Engels' most influential work, he lavished praise on both socialists for their views on the family. He considered Owen's writings on marriage among his most important works. Concerning Fourier he wrote, 'Even more masterful is his critique of the bourgeois form of sexual relationships and the position of the woman in bourgeois society'.¹⁵ While working on *The Origin of the Family* in 1884, he wrote to Karl Kautsky that Fourier had brilliantly anticipated Morgan in many matters.¹⁶ Indeed Engels originally intended his book to be a comparison of Fourier's, Morgan's, and his own ideas, but time constraints forbade this.¹⁷

Another important factor in Marx's intellectual development in the early 1840s was his adoption of Feuerbach's transformative criticism of Hegel, whereby he inverted the subject and predicate of Hegel's idealist philosophy, i.e. thought as the subject and existence as the predicate. Feuerbach further argued that God was merely the hypostatisation of the ideal human and thus theology could be reduced to anthropology. He believed that humans created God in their own image as a consequence of human alienation. Marx took Feuerbach's analysis a step—actually a giant leap—further by applying it to human institutions, including the family. If the concrete individual and existence precede the idea of institutions, then these ideals are no longer sacrosanct, but merely the reflection of extant alienation, which Marx considered primarily economic in origin. In the 'Theses on Feuerbach' Marx made clear what the future of the family would be once alienation was overcome: 'Therefore after, for example, the earthly family is discovered as the secret of the holy family, the former must itself be theoretically and practically destroyed'.¹⁸ Even though it was indirect, Feuerbach's contribution to Marx's view of the family was crucial.

After they adopted a communist position in 1843–1844, Marx and Engels were unrelenting in their assault on the contemporary condition of the family. Engels was more zealous in this battle than his colleague, and he fired the first salvos in an 1844 article published by Marx in the *Deutsch-französische Jahrbücher* and then more substantially in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845). In his article Engels claimed that the factory system was already contributing to the dissolution of the family, especially through its demand for child labour.¹⁹ His book amplified this theme and provided poignant examples of the experiences of working-class families to show the depths of degradation and demoralisation into which the factory system had plunged them. He depicted the noxious hovels that made a home life impossible, the neglect of children because the fathers and

mothers worked in the factories, and other demoralising factors that already spelled doom for the family.²⁰ Although Marx provided copious evidence in *Capital* to expose the abominable conditions of women and children in British factories, only once did he explicitly link this with the dissolution of the family.

Although Marx was generally less eager to address the issue of marriage and family relations than was Engels, the most vitriolic attack on the bourgeois family ideal produced by the pair came from Marx's pen. Although jointly written, the final draft of *The Communist Manifesto* was composed by Marx. Engels' draft included a section on the communist view of the family, and this provided the impetus for Marx to address the issue. However, Marx departed widely from Engels' text by severely castigating the bourgeois conception of the family. Marx lampooned the bourgeoisie for its hypocrisy in presenting the family as a sacred institution based on familial love: 'The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family relationship its sentimental veil and has reduced it to a mere money relationship'.²² In a scathing rebuke, he further blamed the bourgeoisie and the capitalist system for the absence of the family among the proletariat, for the exploitation of children, for prostitution, and for the sexual exploitation of women and girls in the factories.²³ Marx and Engels had previously levelled many of these criticisms at the bourgeoisie in *The German Ideology*, but it remained unpublished during their lives.²⁴

Indeed Fourier preceded Marx and Engels in his exposition of the hypocrisy of his society upholding conventional sexual mores and the sanctity of the family institution. Owen had already pointed out certain inhumane conditions in working-class families. However, Marx and Engels contributed significantly to the anti-family critique by amassing a mountain of empirical data demonstrating that in nineteenth-century capitalist society, the working-class family was in disarray. They left no hope of its recovery from its death throes.

Perhaps an even more powerful critique of the family than their depiction of the hypocrisy and degradation of the contemporary institution was their historicisation of the family. Without this element, their exposé of the horrific conditions confronting the contemporary family could be construed as a call to return to traditional family values, which were being overturned by modern industry.²⁵ This is how the Tories read the parliamentary reports uncovering the inhumane conditions in the factories, from which Marx gleaned so much of his material for *Capital*. Marx and Engels, however, rejected the appeal to an absolute norm for families by addressing three aspects of the historicity of the family. First, they provided a theory of the origin of the family. Secondly, they asserted that the family had developed through various forms during the preceding historical stages, making the bourgeois model merely its latest transitory manifestation. Finally, they insisted that the transformations in the family were primarily precipitated by economic forces. There were significant alterations in their treatment of all three topics following their reading of Morgan's *Ancient Society*, but these shifts did not modify their contempt for the bourgeois family nor their vision of future social relations.

Although Fourier had advanced a theory of the origin and historical development of the family, Marx and Engels did not embrace his views. In *Theorie des quatre mouvements* Fourier had outlined his view of human history,

replete with a chart periodising all of history from the creation of the world to its destruction. With the exception of the fall from paradise (the first period), the first half of history—in which we find ourselves—is characterised by growth and progress, which will culminate in a period of peace and prosperity. Thereafter, during the second half of history, decay and decline set in until the final destruction of the world. Fourier believed we are in the fifth period, civilisation, which was preceded by paradise, savagery, patriarchate, and barbarism.²⁶

Marx and Engels eschewed Fourier's elaborate and fanciful schema of history and with good reason. One glance at Fourier's chart of historical periods impresses one with Fourier's imagination, but not his intellectual judgment. Before reading Morgan, Marx and Engels never speculated on the primitive state of human society before the advent of the family. Indeed, in *The German Ideology* they contended that the family had existed since the beginning of human history. It was the earliest social relationship among humans and developed from the reproductive relationship. They further assumed that all primitive peoples had separate households and dwellings for each family. Marx and Engels did not expostulate on why the sexual relationship between men and women and the resultant offspring would produce family relations, but their account is clearly naturalistic.²⁷

After reading Morgan, however, both Marx and Engels accepted his view that a period of sexual promiscuity without families existed in the earliest period of human history.²⁸ Engels credited Bachofen with this discovery, though Fourier had earlier articulated a similar opinion. According to this view, in primitive society every man had sexual access to every woman and vice versa. There existed no sexual taboos or prohibitions of any kind and even incest was acceptable. This was not a community of women, as many people wrongly supposed, since women were free and had the same rights and prerogatives as men.²⁹ Since these societies were matrilineal, women were esteemed highly and had equal status with men. Engels once argued that this sexual community was a natural state inherited from the animal kingdom.³⁰ He later claimed that the sexual community was a prerequisite for the development of larger social groups and this facilitated the evolution of humans from animals.³¹ With naturalistic explanations such as these, Marx and Engels had shifted to a position in which not the family, but the absence of the family, was the original and natural state of humanity.

Even during the time they assumed that the family was a natural institution of society, Marx and Engels were clear that it was not a fixed entity. In *Capital* Marx pronounced as silly any absolutising of the family, since it had developed through historical stages.³² In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels asserted, 'It is not possible to speak of *'the'* family'.³³ Although they never sketched out the historical stages of the family in their pre-Morgan days, they did touch on some of the effects of the family on subsequent history. The family, in fact, played an important, though malevolent, role in the early history of humanity, according to Marx and Engels. It was within the family that private property and the division of labour first developed. The original division of labour was the sex act, but other labour was differentiated later on the basis of sex and age, which Marx and Engels called a natural or physiological division of labour within the family. Private property also arose first within the family, since women and children became slaves of men. Thus, although in their early writings they considered the

family natural, this was not a compliment nor a reason for resignation. For the family was the source of private property and the division of labour, which Marx and Engels equated with alienation and exploitation.³⁴

Based on Morgan's work, Engels provided a more detailed account of the historical stages of the family. Morgan identified five forms of the family and placed them in a unilinear evolutionary scheme: (1) the consanguine family or group marriage, in which all the men and women of each generation in a society are married; (2) the punaluan family, in which sexual relations between siblings are prohibited, but in which sisters are married to each other's husbands and brothers are married to each other's wives; (3) the pairing family, with loosely paired relationships, but without exclusive rights of cohabitation; (4) the patriarchal family or polygyny; and (5) the monogamous family. Engels adopted this outline *in toto* in *The Origin of the Family* and used it as added ammunition to attack the family. Monogamy was only one stage among others and there was no reason to suppose it was the final one. Unlike Morgan, who saw the history of the family as a continuous march of progress, Engels did not consider monogamy a superior form to the preceding ones. He was unwilling to heed Morgan's admonition to 'value the great institution of the family, as it now exists', but, on the contrary, he portrayed it as even more oppressive than the relationships prevailing in previous stages. It was the institutionalisation of the slavery of women and also signalled the beginning of class conflict.³⁵

Marx's and Engels' materialist conception of history is well-known, but the position of the family in its framework is not so straight-forward. Usually they placed the family in the superstructure, which alters as the economic structure changes:

At a certain state of development of the productive powers of men, you will have a corresponding form of commerce and consumption. At a certain degree of development of production, commerce, and consumption, you will have a corresponding form of social constitution, a corresponding organisation of the family, of the orders or the classes, in one word, of civil society.³⁶

Engels concurred with Marx that 'the family relationship has been modified in the course of history by the property relationships'.³⁷ However, in *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels ascribed to the family a more independent role and placed it alongside human production as a moving force in history. This role for the family, though, was limited to the earliest phases of human history and the family became more subordinate to economic factors as society developed.³⁸ By the time the bourgeois family arrived on the scene, the family was totally ancillary to the economic base. Prohibitions against polygamy in bourgeois society rest on 'real, materialistic causes' and money and boredom are the bonds of bourgeois matrimony.³⁹

Engels' definition of the materialist conception of history and the role of the family therein in *The Origin of the Family* merely builds on the conception set forth by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*. It was not a radical departure from previous formulations of the materialist conception of history, as some seem to think. Engels wrote:

According to the materialist conception of history the determining factor in history is the production and reproduction of immediate life. . . . The social institution, under which the people of a certain historical epoch and a certain country live, are determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labour on the one hand, and of the family on the other.⁴⁰

Indeed many commentators have noted that after providing this definition, Engels largely ignored the role of reproduction and the family in shaping history.⁴¹ This is accurate and accords entirely with the earlier view in *The German Ideology*, where the family dropped out of consideration after having been ascribed a role.

Marx and Engels were attracted to Morgan's work, because they considered it a confirmation of their materialist conception of history. Morgan's linking of historical stages of development with the economic structure of society accorded nicely with their ideas. Engels emphasised especially the economic causes behind the shift from the pairing family to the monogamous family. According to Engels, this change occurred as the result of the introduction of a new means of production—the domestication of animals. The already extant but previously innocuous sexual division of labour placed this new source of wealth in the hands of the men, who were then able to use this property to subjugate women. Matrilineality, which had been the norm before monogamy because of the uncertainty of paternity, was overthrown so that men could pass on their property to their own offspring.⁴²

Aside from the multitude of objections that could be raised against Morgan's and Engels' theory based on ethnological data procured since their time, Engels' explanation is not fully satisfactory. In his zeal to prove the role of economic transformations in historical development, he ignored a crucial question: Why would men in a matrilineal system want to bequeath their property to their own biological children? Engels seemed to assume that there is an inherent desire to benefit one's own progeny, since males, when given the necessary power by their new form of wealth, were no longer willing to see that property pass on to their sisters' children. However, if there is some natural bond between the father and his children, this vitiates Engels' analysis, for he insisted that the transformation to monogamy was social and not natural.⁴³

Although insisting on the primacy of economic and social factors in the development of monogamy from the pairing family, Engels evinced still more naturalism by adopting Morgan's Darwinian explanations for the earlier evolution of the family. He agreed with Morgan that natural selection was the mechanism responsible for the shift from the consanguine to the punaluan and from the punaluan to the pairing family. By restricting incest and inbreeding, these newer forms of the family had the selective advantage of producing physically stronger people within the groups practising them.⁴⁴ Engels' adoption of a Darwinian mechanism to account for social change does not seem at all compatible with the materialist conception of history. At minimum such a naturalistic theory greatly restricts the applicability of the materialist conception of history to human society, limiting it to more recent stages of social development.⁴⁵ It also sounds strangely like those Social Darwinist theories that Engels continually combatted.

Despite the vacillation in their treatment of past epochs of human history, Marx and Engels were clear that the transformation from bourgeois society to communist society would be rooted in economic causes. In an early manuscript Marx stated:

Religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc. are only *particular* modes of production and come under its general law. The positive supersession (*Aufhebung*) of *private property* as the appropriation of *human* life, is therefore the positive supersession (*Aufhebung*) of all alienation, and therefore the return of people out of religion, family, state, etc. into his *human*, i.e. *social* existence.⁴⁶

Since Marx is here comparing the supersession of the family in communist society with the supersession of religion and the state, he must have expected the absence of the family in communist society, since he believed that religion and the state would eventually cease to exist. This is confirmed by his continual insistence that the family would be destroyed: 'Therefore after, for example, the earthly family is discovered as the secret of the holy family, the former must itself be theoretically and practically destroyed'.⁴⁷ Although Marx once enigmatically referred to a higher form of family to supplant the bourgeois family, he and Engels castigated Hermann Kriege, a fellow socialist, for not insisting on the destruction of the family.⁴⁸

Despite their emphatic rejection of the family institution, however, their rendition of the place of the family within the materialist conception of history left an ambiguous legacy that has plagued socialists and feminists down to the present. If the family is a mere epiphenomenon reflecting the economic structure of society, a thorough-going critique of the family is superfluous or, worse yet, a distraction from more crucial matters. If, however, the family is an independent factor interacting with the economic structure, then greater emphasis could be accorded to a critique of the family.

Whichever side of Marx and Engels one stresses, however, it is clear that they subordinated in a significant way their critique of the family to their critique of economics. This distinguished Marx's and Engels' view of the family from that of Fourier and Owen. Marx and Engels believed that the abolition of private property and the introduction of socialism would bring in its wake a dissolution of the family. Fourier and Owen, on the other hand, saw the abolition of the family as part and parcel of their socialist proposals to ameliorate society. Both Fourier and Owen hoped that small communist enclaves—for Fourier the phalansteries and for Owen communities of 500–2000 people—would supplant the family as a social and economic unit and thus facilitate the transformation to socialism. Owen's continual emphasis on the role of education in shaping an individual's character and outlook lent urgency to his appeal for the abolition of the family, since only by removing children from the supposedly irrational and deleterious influence of parents could he hope to alter society. The materialist conception of history shifted attention away from the family and sexual relationships and relegated them to a position of less significance than the economy.

The radicalism of Marx's and Engels' position has occasionally been toned down by a misreading of the passage in *The Communist Manifesto* dealing with

the abolition of the family. Supposedly Marx and Engels were defending the communists against the false accusation by the bourgeoisie that they wanted to abolish the family.⁴⁹ However, instead of renouncing the abolition of the family, they claimed that the bourgeoisie had already done the job for them. If Marx and Engels had merely wanted to reform the bourgeois family, their earlier condemnation of Kriege as cowardly would have rebounded on their own heads.

Furthermore, Marx and Engels provided some hints in *The Communist Manifesto* concerning the social relations that would supersede the family. First they discussed the status of children, whose exploitation they wanted to end. They proposed the replacement of home education by social education (*Erziehung*), which included, but encompassed far more than, sending children to public schools. The German term *Erziehung* entails not only formal education, but any training of children, including that normally given by parents. Marx and Engels reinforced their point further by assaulting the 'bourgeois claptrap about the family and education, about the hallowed co-relation of parent and child'.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Engels in his draft for *The Communist Manifesto* articulated more clearly his vision for children in communist society: 'The raising (*Erziehung*) of children together in national institutions and at national expense, from that moment on, in which they can dispense with the first motherly care'.⁵¹

The child-rearing principles that Marx and Engels espoused were not original. Fourier and especially Owen had already vigorously touted the superiority of the communal education of children and the removal of children from parental control and influence. However, these views were by no means universally adopted in leftist circles in the nineteenth century. Proudhon was an advocate and polemicist on behalf of the traditional family, which he considered the only social institution worth salvaging. Even the anarchist Bakunin proposed the maintenance of parent-child relationships, except in cases where society perceived deleterious effects on a child's development.⁵²

One of Marx's and Engels' suggestions in *The Communist Manifesto* for facilitating the transformation to communist society tended to weaken parent-child ties still more—the abolition of inheritance.⁵³ This would be the first step in stripping the family of its role as an economic unit. With no private property and with economic opportunities for all in communist society, there would be no need for the financial support commonly provided by the family unit.

When Marx turned to address the status of marriage in *The Communist Manifesto*, he concentrated on the accusation that communists wanted to introduce a community of women. Marx countered by rebuking the bourgeoisie for already practising the community of women through prostitution and adultery, and then he advocated the abolition of the community of women, a position he had advanced earlier in his 1844 manuscripts.⁵⁴ It is not at all clear what form Marx thought marriage would take in communist society, but again, Engels filled in the details. Marriage would no longer be a legal relationship, but would be purely a private affair between individuals. The absence of private property would contribute to a far freer relationship, since the woman would not be dependent on any man. Furthermore, since children would be raised communally, they would not be of any concern in relationships between the sexes.⁵⁵

Marx's lack of attention to the family in most of his writings and his reluctance to expostulate on the future state of the family do not imply indifference on his part. After 1843 Marx ignored various parts of the superstructure of society, e.g. religion, in the same way he avoided discussion of the family. He believed his critique of the economic structure would impact the elements of the superstructure, including the family, more than any direct attacks ever could. He consistently avoided speculation on any details of communist society and remained content with presenting only the barest outline of future society.

Engels was not so circumspect, and he elaborated still further on the future state of the family in *The Origin of the Family*, especially in the fourth edition. First of all, he reiterated a position that he and Marx had advanced in their early writings—that private housework would be supplanted by social labour. Not only would women work in factories, as was already beginning to occur, but private housework would be converted into a public industry with communal child care, cooking, etc. This would liberate women from the economic bondage of the family.⁵⁶

Implicit in the abolition of marriage is a radically new sexual morality. Engels asserted that only with the abolition of the family could individual sexual love emerge as the dominant form of sexual relationship. The institution of marriage too often restricted such relationships because economic factors often militate toward marriages of convenience or material advantage. In communist society, however, the only norm of sexual behaviour would be that sexual relations must be an expression of mutual love.⁵⁷ The communal care of children would also loosen inhibitions to sexual relationships, because the fear of pregnancy would be obviated:

This [the communal care of children] removes the anxiety about the 'consequences', which today forms the most essential social—moral as well as economic—factor that hinders a girl from giving herself completely to the man she loves. Will that not be cause enough for the gradual advent of more free and easy sexual relations and with it also a more tolerant public opinion concerning virginal honour and a woman's shame?⁵⁸

Engels' stress on individual sexual love did not mean that he endorsed a sexual free-for-all or thought orgies would be a prominent feature of communist society, as Fourier believed. Despite all his advocacy of greater sexual freedom, Engels described sexual love in a surprisingly conservative manner in the 1891 edition of *The Origin of the Family*. He asserted that sexual love is not fickle, but is characterised by a level of intensity and duration that causes lovers to regard separation as a misfortune. It involves a devotion that would cause lovers to risk anything up to their own lives to possess each other. This form of love relationship sounds remarkably like a loose form of monogamy, and indeed Engels made this explicit:

Now since sexual love is by its nature exclusive—although this exclusivity is currently only completely realised in the wife—so the marriage founded on sexual love is by nature individual marriage. . . . If the economic considerations disappear which made women put up with the habitual infidelity of their husbands—concern for their own existence and still more for their children's future—then, according to

all previous experience, the equality of woman thereby achieved will tend in infinitely greater measure to make men really monogamous than to make women polyandrous.⁵⁹

However, unlike contemporary society, there would be no bond of matrimony to hinder the dissolution of sexual relationships. Engels admitted that the duration of sexual love would vary from one individual to the other, and the cessation of sexual love or the kindling of a new love would make the separation of lovers beneficial for both parties as well as for society.⁶⁰

The view of future marriage and sexual relationships that Marx and Engels sketched was largely compatible with the conceptions of Owen and Bakunin. Owen advocated individual marriage based only on mutual affection and fairly easy divorce if that affection faded. However, he also allowed for some paternalistic direction and regulation of these relationships by more experienced members of society. They should encourage and facilitate permanent marriage, though without compelling individuals to live in situations contrary to their inclinations. Bakunin's ideas on marriage were even closer to Marx's and Engels', since he, as a radical proponent of freedom, espoused 'free marriage', i.e. the totally voluntary relationship between a man and woman, about which society has nothing to say. Bakunin, like Engels, assumed that the most natural relationship and thus the norm in future society would be a loose monogamy without external restrictions.⁶¹ Fourier, on the other hand, considered the sexual fidelity and constancy of monogamy as totally inconsistent with human passions. He argued that the freeing of sexual passions would put an end to anything even vaguely resembling monogamy and the result would be shorter and variegated sexual relationships and even orgies on occasion.⁶²

Engels' view that the family would be replaced by a romantic dyad having a modicum of stability was fully consistent with his and Marx's earlier statements, though it added considerably to them.⁶³ Perhaps more importantly, it matched his own experience with marriage and love relationships to a large extent. After indulging in various sexual escapades and having a variety of mistresses in the 1840s, Engels settled down in the 1850s into a durable relationship with Mary Burns, whom he never married, though he often referred to her as his wife.⁶⁴ For purposes of business and social contacts, Engels maintained separate bachelor quarters in addition to his apartment with Burns, who, as an illiterate Irish working-class woman, would probably not have been welcome in the bourgeois circles Engels frequented in Manchester. Their relationship only ended with her death in 1863, which brought great sorrow to Engels. After her death, he formed a stable liaison with her sister, Lizzy Burns, whom he only married on her deathbed in 1878.⁶⁵ Engels' life was thus quite consistent with the abolition of the family that he advocated and his vision of the romantic dyad in future society.

On the surface Marx's marriage and family life seem by comparison typically bourgeois. However, even before he married, seeds of revolt against the constraints of family life were evident. Concerned about Marx's future bride, Jenny von Westphalen, Marx's father harboured doubts that Marx was capable of enjoying domestic felicity and making Jenny happy.⁶⁶ His father's presentiments proved largely correct, as Marx's family lived from one crisis to the next, caused most often by lack of funds, since Marx had no steady employment.

Perhaps Marx exaggerated when he wrote Engels in 1862 that every day Jenny expressed the wish to die, but her situation was nevertheless quite miserable.⁶⁷ Marx recognised that his devotion to communism had deprived his family and 'shattered the life' of Jenny. Because of this, he claimed that if he could repeat things, he would not marry.⁶⁸ In the midst of one of his frequent financial crises, Marx confided to Engels, 'Blessed is he who has no family'.⁶⁹

In the midst of all its tribulations, however, Marx's family remained close-knit and affectionate.⁷⁰ He entered marriage prior to embracing his views on the abolition of the family, but he saw no reason thereafter to dissolve the bond. Although he probably fathered an illegitimate child, otherwise he was apparently a model husband and remained faithful to his wife.⁷¹ In 1856, after thirteen years of marriage, he wrote her a very effusive love letter that illustrated the depths of his love for her: 'But the love, not for Feuerbachian man, nor for Moleschott's metabolism, nor for the proletariat, but the love for the sweetheart, and namely for you, makes the man a man again'.⁷² If anyone illustrated the stable romantic dyad that Engels postulated as the typical amorous relationship of the future, it was Marx.

Marx's relationship with his children does not seem at all consistent with a desire to communally raise children. He greatly enjoyed playing and romping with them and was extremely solicitous for their welfare. Part of the reason for his financial problems was his alacrity to spend beyond his income to provide various amenities for his children, including private tutoring in languages, music, and drama.⁷³ He asked Engels to take over fatherly responsibilities toward his children after he died.⁷⁴ Sometimes Marx the father intervened in his daughters' lives in ways that seem to contradict his role as revolutionary abolisher of families and liberator of children. When Paul Lafargue was courting his daughter, Laura, he warned him to keep his distance for a time and demanded that he prove he could financially support a wife.⁷⁵ He effectively blocked Eleanor's relationship with Prosper Lissagaray and refused to recognise their engagement, despite her pleading.⁷⁶ He certainly was not prepared to allow his own daughters to live in complete sexual liberty.⁷⁷

Neither Marx nor Engels lived to see the tragedy that befell the daughter who lived in greatest consistency with their ideal of the abolition of the family—Eleanor Marx. She was the daughter about whom Marx averred, 'Jenny [the eldest daughter] is most like me, but Tussy [Eleanor] is me'.⁷⁸ After the death of her parents, she fell in love with Edward Aveling and lived with him, despite the fact that he was still legally married to another woman. Aveling's infidelity to Eleanor climaxed in June 1897 when he secretly married Eva Frye, a twenty-two year old woman, even while still living with Eleanor. Two months later, Eleanor was heartbroken by his departure and confided to Frederick Demuth that 'one *can't* wipe out 14 years of one's life as if they had not been.' Several months later, despite Edward's return, Eleanor committed suicide, probably as the result of learning about Aveling's secret marriage.⁷⁹ Apparently the romantic dyad was not so easily dissolved as Engels had assumed, nor would freedom from marriage produce universal bliss.

Marx's and Engels' conception of the abolition of the family was quite radical, though perhaps less so than Fourier's earlier formulations. They never masked their contempt for present family relationships and their hope for radically new

social relations in communist society. Their historicisation of the family abetted their position, since it implied that no transhistorical norms for the family exist.

There were numerous naturalistic elements in their view of the family, and Marx and, to an even greater extent, Engels have been severely censured by feminists for these.⁸⁰ However, none of the critics seems to have noticed that the naturalistic elements are confined largely to pre-civilised societies and they drop away in bourgeois society and certainly in communist society. This sets Marx and Engels apart from their predecessors Fourier and Owen, since the latter pair explicitly argued that their socialist theories were based on natural laws and were consistent with the natural inclinations and passions of humans. Harmony with nature—including human nature—was a conscious goal of Fourier's and Owen's social planning, including their ideals for sexual relationships and the raising of children.⁸¹

Marx's and Engels' position, then, was a decisive move away from the naturalism of their predecessors. The aspects of naturalism they retained in no way blunted their radicalism. They held forth the hope that, instead of submitting to nature, communist society would be consciously shaped by humans freely creating.⁸² People would no longer be subject to what is natural. Even if people had a natural bond to their children, no provision would be made for this in communist society. Whatever Engels may have conjectured about the natural affinity of humans toward stable amorous relationships in communist society, he envisioned a society in which no compulsion would interfere with relationships. Thus, theoretically, any sexual relationship between mutually consenting persons would be possible. What would not be possible would be the security of a life-long marriage. This sexual relationship could not be chosen.

Richard Weikart

California State University, Stanislaus

Acknowledgement: Thanks to Allan McGill and an anonymous reader for helping me improve this article.

NOTES

1. Friedrich Engels, 'Das Buch der Offenbarung', in *Marx-Engels Werke* (Berlin, 1959; henceforth *MEW*), XXI, p. 10.
2. Karl Maarx, 'Drei neue Gesetzentwürfe' (13 March 1849), in *MEW*, VI, pp. 341-342; Otto Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, Volume 2: *The Period of Consolidation, 1871-1880* (Princeton, 1990), pp. 333, 395.
3. H.F. Peters, *Red Jenny: A Life with Karl Marx* (London, 1986), p. 99.
4. Clara Zetkin, *Die Gleichheit* (17-21 August 1895), in *Ihre Namen Leben durch die Jahrhunderte fort: Kondolenz und Nekrologe zum Tode von Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels* (Berlin, 1983), pp. 340-341.
5. See Bernhard J. Stern, 'Engels on the Family', in *Centenary of Marxism*, ed. Samuel Bernstein (New York, 1948), pp. 42-43, 63-64; Ronald Florence, *Marx's Daughters: Eleanor Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Angelika Balabanoff* (New York, 1975), p. 36; Ronald Fletcher, *The Abolitionists: The Family and Marriage under Attack*

- (London, 1988), pp. 55–56, 63, 71, 75; and Rudolf J. Siebert, *Hegel's Concept of Marriage and Family: The Origin of Subjective Freedom* (Washington, DC, 1979), pp. 77–79.
6. Michelle Barrett, 'Marxist-Feminism and the Work of Karl Marx', in *Marx: A Hundred Years On*, ed. Betty Matthews (London, 1983), pp. 216–217; Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1983), p. 62; Terrell Carver, 'Engels's Feminism', *History of Political Thought* 6 (1985), pp. 486–487; Moira Maconachie, 'Engels, Sexual Divisions, and the Family', in *Engels Revisited: New Feminist Essays*, ed. Janet Sayers, Mary Evans, and Nanneke Redclift (London, 1987), pp. 99, 104–105; Mark Poster, *Critical Theory of the Family* (New York, 1978), p. 44.
 7. On Hegel's position, see Siebert, *Hegel's Concept*, esp. pp. 43–45; and Joan B. Landes, 'Hegel's Conception of the Family', in *The Family in Political Thought*, ed. Jean Bethke Elshtain (Amherst, 1982), pp. 125–144.
 8. Karl Marx, 'Der Ehescheidungsgesetzentwurf', in *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin, 1975; henceforth *MEGA*), I/1, pp. 287–289.
 9. Charles Fourier, *Theorie des quatre mouvements et des destinées générales*, in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1846; rpt. Paris, 1966), I, pp. 57–143 *passim*, esp. 73, 78, 89, 110–117, 125, 143; Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World* (Berkeley, 1986), Chapters 13, 15 *passim*; Philip Abbott, *The Family on Trial: Special Relationships in Modern Political Thought* (University Park, PA, 1981), pp. 66, 70.
 10. Marx and Engels, 'Die Deutsche Ideologie', in *MEW*, III, pp. 500–501.
 11. Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann (12 December 1868), in *MEW*, XXXII, p. 583; *MEGA*, I/29a, p. 703.
 12. Marx and Engels, 'Deutsche Ideologie', in *MEW*, III, p. 164–165.
 13. On Owen's view of the family, see excerpts from Owen's *Marriages of the Priesthood of the Old Immoral World* in A.L. Morton, *The Life and Ideas of Robert Owen* (New York, 1963), pp. 161–168; and J.F.C. Harrison, *Quest for the New Moral World: Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America* (New York, 1969), pp. 59–62.
 14. Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, p. 42.
 15. Engels, 'Anti-Dühring', in *MEGA*, I/27, pp. 432–433, 429 (see also 476).
 16. Engels to Karl Kautsky (26 April 1884), in *MEW*, XXXVI, p. 143.
 17. Engels, *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats*, in *MEGA*, I/29, p. 113n.
 18. Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', in *MEW*, III, p. 6.
 19. Engels, 'Umriss zu einer Kritik der Nationalökonomie', in *MEW*, I, p. 505.
 20. Engels, 'Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England', in *MEW*, II, pp. 337–338, 356, 367–371.
 21. Marx, 'Das Kapital', in *MEGA*, II/t, pp. 401–402.
 22. Marx and Engels, 'Das kommunistische Manifest', in *MEW*, IV, p. 465.
 23. Marx and Engels, 'Das kommunistische Manifest', in *MEW*, IV, pp. 478–479. Engels echoed this critique in 'Anti-Dühring', in *MEGA*, I/27, p. 427.
 24. Marx and Engels, 'Deutsche Ideologie', in *MEW*, III, p. 164.
 25. Indeed Fletcher incongruously misinterprets Marx and Engels in this way in *Abolitionists*, p. 63.
 26. Fourier, 'Theorie', in *Oeuvres Complètes*, I, pp. 58–63 and *passim*.
 27. Marx and Engels, 'Deutsche Ideologie', in *MEW*, III, p. 29.
 28. *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx*, ed. Lawrence Krader (Assen, 1972), pp. 63, 102.
 29. Engels, *Ursprung der Familie*, in *MEGA*, I/29, pp. 22, 23n., 135; Engels to Karl Kautsky (2 March 1883), in *MEW*, XXXV, p. 448.
 30. Engels to Karl Kautsky (2 March 1883), in *MEW*, XXXV, p. 447.

31. Engels, 'Ursprung der Familie' (4th edition, 1891), in *MEGA*, I/29, p. 155.
32. Marx, 'Kapital', in *MEGA*, II/5, p. 402.
33. Marx and Engels, *Deutsche Ideologie*, in *MEW*, III, p. 164 (see also 29).
34. *Ibid.*, III, pp. 22, 31–32; Marx, 'Kapital', in *MEGA*, II/5, p. 286.
35. Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society*, ed. Eleanor Leacock (Cleveland, 1963), pp. 393–394, 499; Engels, 'Ursprung der Familie', in *MEGA*, I/29, pp. 33, 35–36, 99.
36. Marx to Pawel Annenkow (28 December 1846), in *MEGA*, III/2, p. 71.
37. Engels, 'Draft of a Communist Confession of Faith', in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, VI, p. 102.
38. Marx and Engels, 'Deutsche Ideologie', in *MEW*, III, p. 29.
39. Marx and Engels, 'Deutsche Ideologie', in *MEW*, III, pp. 145, 164.
40. Engels, 'Ursprung der Familie', in *MEGA*, I/29, pp. 11–12.
41. Carver, 'Engels's Feminism', pp. 480–481; Jane Humphries, 'The Origin of the Family: Born out of Scarcity Not Wealth', in *Engels Revisited*, p. 14; Maconachie, 'Engels, Sexual Divisions, and the Family', in *Engels Revisited*, p. 108.
42. Engels, 'Ursprung der Familie', in *MEGA*, I/29, pp. 11, 35–36, 99.
43. *Ibid.*, I/29, pp. 30, 36; Maconachie, 'Engels', pp. 104–105.
44. Engels, 'Ursprung der Familie', in *MEGA*, I/29, pp. 24, 27, 30.
45. See Janet Sayers, 'For Engels: Psychoanalytic Perspectives', in *Engels Revisited*, pp. 57–80, esp. 59, for further arguments on Engels' inconsistency in applying dialectical materialism to the family.
46. Marx, 'Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte', in *MEGA*, I/2, p. 264.
47. Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', in *MEW*, III, p. 6.
48. Marx, 'Kapital', in *MEGA*, II/5, pp. 401–402; Marx and Engels, 'Zirkular gegen Kriege', in *MEW*, IV, p. 7.
49. This position is taken by Stern, 'Engels on the Family', pp. 42–43, 63–64; Florence, *Marx's Daughters*, p. 36; Fletcher, *Abolitionists*, pp. 55–56, 63, 71, 75; and Siebert, *Hegel's Concept*, pp. 77–79.
50. Marx and Engels, 'Das kommunistische Manifest', in *MEW*, IV, p. 476.
51. Engels, 'Grundsätze des Kommunismus', in *MEW*, IV, pp. 373, 377.
52. For Fourier, see note 9; Robert Owen, *The Book of the New Moral World* (7 parts, London, 1842–1844; rpt. New York, 1970), II, pp. 40–41 and *passim*; Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *La Pornocratie ou les femmes dans les temps modernes* (Paris, 1875), pp. 2–3; Michail Bakunin, *Staatlichkeit und Anarchie und andere Schriften*, ed. Horst Stuke (Frankfurt, 1972), pp. 21–22.
53. Marx and Engels, 'Das kommunistische Manifest', in *MEW*, IV, p. 481; Engels, 'Grundsätze des Kommunismus', in *MEW*, IV, p. 374.
54. Marx and Engels, 'Das kommunistische Manifest', in *MEW*, IV, pp. 478–479; Marx, 'Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte', in *MEGA*, I/2, p. 387.
55. Engels, 'Grundsätze des Kommunismus', in *MEW*, IV, p. 377.
56. Engels, 'Ursprung der Familie', in *MEGA*, I/29, pp. 99, 188; 'Anti-Dühring', in *MEGA*, I/27, p. 476; Engels to Gertrude Guillaume-Schack (5 July 1885), in *MEW*, XXXVI, p. 341; Marx and Engels, 'Deutsche Ideologie', in *MEW*, III, p. 29.
57. Engels, 'Ursprung der Familie', in *MEGA*, I/29, pp. 188–189.
58. *Ibid.*, I/29, p. 188.
59. *Ibid.*, I/29, p. 193.
60. *Ibid.*, I/29, pp. 189, 193.
61. Bakunin, *Staatlichkeit und Anarchie*, p. 21.
62. Owen, *Book of the New Moral World*, V, pp. 70–71; Bakunin, *Staatlichkeit und Anarchie*, p. 21; on Fourier, see note 9.
63. Abbott, *Family on Trial*, pp. 72–73.
64. Terrell Carver, *Friedrich Engels: His Life and Thought* (New York, 1990), pp. 148–152.

65. W.O. Henderson, *The Life of Friedrich Engels* (London, 1976), I, pp. 195, 207, 211; II, 559, 564, 567.
66. Heinrich Marx to Karl Marx (2 March 1837), in *MEGA*, III/1, p. 308.
67. Marx to Engels (18 June 1862), in *MEW*, XXX, p. 248.
68. Marx to Paul Lafargue (13 August 1866), in *MEW*, XXXI, pp. 518–519.
69. Marx to Engels (21 June 1854), in *MEW*, XXVIII, p. 371.
70. Jerrold Seigel, *Marx's Fate: The Shape of a Life* (Princeton, 1978), pp. 268–270.
71. Most scholars suspect that Marx fathered Frederick Demuth, the illegitimate son of Marx's housekeeper, Helene Demuth. See David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* (New York, 1973), pp. 271–272, or for more detail, Yvonne Kapp, *Eleanor Marx* (New York, 1972–1976), I, pp. 289–297. Carver argues forcefully against Marx's paternity in *Friedrich Engels*, pp. 161–171, but his arguments are strained.
72. Marx to Jenny Marx (21 June 1856), in *MEW*, XXIX, pp. 532–536.
73. Seigel, *Marx's Fate*, p. 260.
74. Engels to Florence Kelly-Wishnewetzky (9 February 1887), in *MEW*, XXXVI, p. 607.
75. Marx to Paul Lafargue (13 August 1866), in *MEW*, XXXI, pp. 518–519.
76. Peters, *Red Jenny*, pp. 161–162.
77. Florence, *Marx's Daughters*, pp. 28–29.
78. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
79. Kapp, *Eleanor Marx*, II, pp. 677, 680, 707; Chushichi Tsuzuki, *The Life of Eleanor Marx, 1855–1898: A Socialist Tragedy* (Oxford, 1967), pp. 2, 333; Florence, *Marx's Daughters*, p. 73.
80. Barrett, 'Marxist-Feminism', pp. 216–217; Vogel, *Marxism*, p. 62; Carver, 'Engels's Feminism', pp. 486–487; Maconachie, 'Engels', pp. 99, 104–105; Poster, *Critical Theory*, p. 44.
81. For example, see Owen, *Book of the New Moral World*, V, p. 71; VI, p. 84.
82. Marx, 'Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte', in *MEGA*, I/2, pp. 390, 395–396; Engels, 'Anti-Dühring', in *MEGA*, I/27, pp. 312–313, 446, 534.