

The Contemporary Interpretation of the Women's Liberation Ideology in "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State"

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Abstract: Marxism has provided an important ideological weapon for the women's liberation movement in China. Among them, Engels' ideas on women's liberation in "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State" are particularly crucial. Through his examination of the changes in women's status, Engels revealed that private ownership is the root cause of women's oppression and clarified the path to women's liberation. This thought has significant enlightenment significance for solving women's issues in our country and enriching the theory of women in socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Keywords: Engels; "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State"; Women's liberation ideology; Women's status

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1. The changes in women's status and their causes

Engels, based on historical materialism, through the examination of the evolution of marriage and family forms, the two forms of production relations, and the large-scale division of labor in society, revealed the historical process of the gradual decline of women's status.

1.1. The changes in the status of women in marital and family settings

Engels classified the forms of marriage and family into four stages: the bloodline family, the patrilineal family, the pair system family, and the monogamous family. As a result, the status of women changed accordingly.

1.1.1. Women were highly respected during the polygamous family system

The patrilineal family is the first stage in the evolution of family forms, characterized by dividing marital

groups based on generations. Engels pointed out: “In this family form, only the rights and obligations of mutual marriage between ancestors and descendants, and between parents and children, were excluded” ^[1]. This regulation marked the beginning of humans consciously regulating sexual relationships. The Punaraya family, as the second stage, excluded sexual relationships among siblings. Engels believed that it “prepared the conditions for the emergence of the clan system” ^[2]. Women were highly respected under the polygamous system, forming a matriarchy as they determined blood ties and undertook stable clan labor; their reproductive role was socially significant. The lofty status of women was determined by the level of productivity at that time.

1.1.2. Women’s status gradually declined during the matrilineal family system period

The dualistic family emerged during the transitional period from the primitive age to the barbaric age, serving as an intermediate stage between polygamy and monogamy. Its characteristic was that one man had one primary wife, and one woman had one primary husband ^[1]. The marital relationship was unstable, and the children still belonged to the mother’s clan. The status of women was still somewhat maintained. This type of family retained the features of matriarchy while giving birth to the sprouts of patriarchy.

The domestication of animals and the development of animal husbandry brought about profound changes. Engels pointed out that the herds, the goods obtained from animals, and slaves all belonged to men. The increase in wealth and its transfer to private ownership of the family dealt a huge blow to the matriarchal and matrilineal societies. Men became the main possessors of wealth, and the “father” role was established, replacing the matriarchal inheritance system with the patrilineal one. Engels called this transformation “the failure of women with world-historical significance” ^[2].

1.1.3. During the period of the monogamous family system, the subordinate status of women was formed

The monogamous family was a sign of the arrival of the civilized era. It was based on the establishment of economic conditions and private property, with the aim of ensuring that male biological children inherit the property. The marital relationship became more stable, but at the cost of sacrificing women’s freedom. Free women and female slaves shared the same structure in terms of being under male domination, and became “the main domestic servants.” The transformation of the nature of household labor is a direct manifestation of women’s oppression. The previously public and socially necessary household labor has transformed into private family labor. Women are excluded from social production and are unable to create exchange value, thus losing economic independence. Men hold the ownership of labor tools and living materials, and play a dominant role in both the family and society. The position of women’s oppression is fully established.

1.2. The root cause of women’s oppression

The low status of women was gradually formed during the course of social and historical development, rather than being inherent. Changes in marriage and family forms led to the transformation from matriarchy to patriarchy, resulting in a gradual decline in women’s status.

1.2.1. Imbalance of the “two kinds of production”

Engels pointed out: “From a materialist perspective, the decisive factors in history, in the final analysis, are the direct production and reproduction of life. However, production itself has two aspects. On one

hand, there is the production of means of subsistence; on the other hand, there is the production of human beings themselves.”^[3] The relationship between these two types of production constantly adjusts with the development of productive forces. The status of material production continuously rises, while the status of human self-production gradually declines. From an original balance, it moves towards a structural imbalance.

In early societies, productivity was low, and men were responsible for obtaining food while women handled household chores. Both of these were considered public labor. Women’s labor was more stable, and due to their role in giving birth, they were more respected. As productivity increased, surplus value emerged, private ownership was born, and social material production became the main source of wealth. Men, with their physical advantages, became the main labor force. Women’s childbearing and household chores were classified as private family affairs, unable to create exchange value and thus excluded from the overall social production.

Private ownership transforms the surplus products into private property, making it difficult to measure the value of human beings themselves using social exchange standards. The imbalance between the two types of production leads to the double loss of women: on the one hand, they lose the foundation of economic independence and have to rely on men; on the other hand, their human production functions lose the deserved social recognition. Women have transformed from respected subjects to oppressed objects. The oppression of women is a product of the development of productive forces to a certain stage and will disappear along with the elimination of private ownership^[4].

1.2.2. Three major social divisions of labor

Engels systematically examined the three major social divisions of labor and revealed how the development of productive forces reshaped the relationship between the sexes. The natural division of labor based on physiological differences did not lead to gender oppression. It was only as the social division of labor deepened that the relationship between the sexes began to become unequal.

“The first major social division (separation of animal husbandry and agriculture) saw men become primary wealth creators, laying the foundation for patriarchy. The second (separation of handicrafts from agriculture) and third (emergence of the merchant class) divisions further solidified private ownership and institutionalized the gender imbalance. Consequently, men secured ownership of production materials, while women were confined to privatized domestic labor, leading to the replacement of matriarchy by patriarchy.”

1.2.3. The emergence of private ownership

Engels believed that private ownership was the root cause of women’s oppression. The division of capitalist society into the proletariat and the bourgeoisie was caused by private ownership. Women, as part of the proletariat, experienced a decline in their status as the bourgeoisie ruthlessly exploited and oppressed them. Engels analyzed in “The Origin” that what he considered the most crucial factor was the emergence of private ownership, which led to the continuous exploitation of women by the bourgeoisie. The development of productivity, with men’s natural physiological advantages controlling production materials and land, led to the continuous improvement of men’s social status. At the same time, women’s participation in the household chores, which had no material value, in the monogamous marriage and family system also led to their unfair treatment. Moreover, women’s natural physiological conditions were weaker than men’s, and in social production, women were excluded. It was precisely because of the emergence of private ownership that various conditions gradually led to women being oppressed.

2. Approaches to achieving women's liberation

Eliminating private ownership is the fundamental way to achieve women's liberation. In addition, it is necessary to enable women to return to public services, promote the development of modern large-scale industries, socialize domestic labor, and ensure women's freedom in marriage ^[5].

2.1. The fundamental way to achieve women's liberation

Private ownership has disrupted the harmonious relationship between the two sexes. Men have become the rulers while women have been oppressed. Engels placed the liberation of women at the same level as the liberation of all humanity, believing that the liberation of women is consistent with the liberation of the proletariat. He pointed out that the fundamental way to achieve women's liberation is to eliminate private ownership and establish a society with public ownership. When productivity is highly developed and private ownership and classes disappear, the means of production will belong to the public, and the opposition between the two sexes will disappear, eliminating the economic root of exploiting women. The monogamous system will not perish but will truly be realized as a marital form of equality between the two sexes.

2.2. The prerequisite for achieving women's liberation

2.2.1. All women return to the public sector

Only large-scale public social labor can bring women economic independence, the prerequisite for liberation, breaking male domination. Women can only join in social production if they have an economically independent status. Only when economically independent can there be the prerequisite for liberation. Therefore, for women to achieve liberation, domestic work can only be a small part of their work, and they must go to the public social production labor, and it must be on a large scale and take up a lot of time. Women can participate in public labor and obtain a stable economic income, which can help them economically break free from male domination, no longer be in a dependent position, and finally obtain reasonable rights and status in the family and society.

2.2.2. Modern large-scale industry

It provides rich channels for women's public labor participation, a key to their liberation and status improvement in the low productivity. Only when economic liberation is achieved can women's liberation be realized. Many opportunities for women to participate in social production are provided by modern large-scale industry. Modern large-scale industry has successfully opened up rich channels for women to participate in public labor. Therefore, if women want to participate in public labor, they must rely on modern industrialized large-scale production. This is of great significance for improving women's family and social status and for women's liberation.

2.2.3. Socialization of housework

Realizing the socialization of household chores and liberating women from household affairs so that they can engage in social production and achieve economic independence ^[6]. The reason why women, who were once part of the household laborers in the social division of labor, have now become trapped in household chores is that household chores have lost their public nature and transformed into private labor solely serving the family. This is an important reason for the decline in women's status. The liberation of women should first involve allowing them to return to public life. In reality, even if women obtain opportunities for social

production, they still face the burden of family obligations and find it difficult to fully devote themselves to work, getting caught in the contradiction between work and family. Engels pointed out that modern individual families are built on “open or covert domestic slavery of women.” The liberation of women “is possible only when a large number of women participate in production on a social scale, and domestic chores only take up a very small portion of their time.” It liberates women from household chores, resolving work-family conflicts. Domestic work socialization turns it into social production, securing women’s equal economic status.

2.2.4. Full freedom in marriage

When political and economic interests rather than love play a decisive role in marriage, the relationship between the two sexes becomes difficult to be equal. Engels pointed out that the marriages of the ruling class are mostly based on economic interests, and truly love-based unions are extremely rare. This inevitably leads to the inequality of the relationship between the two sexes. Engels stated in “The Origin”: “The mutual love between the two parties should be above all else and become the foundation of marriage”, “The full freedom to marry can only be universally realized after the elimination of capitalist production and the property relations it has created, thereby eliminating all additional economic considerations that still have a significant influence on the choice of a spouse today.” (The proletariat is more likely to achieve love-based marriage) Therefore, love becomes the foundation of marriage, and women thus gain the rights of marital freedom and love freedom. This is one of the important conditions for women’s liberation.

3. Contemporary implications of Engels’ women’s liberation ideology

Engels’ thoughts on women’s liberation still hold significant reference value in today’s society. By considering the actual situation of Chinese women, people can draw inspiration from the following aspects^[7].

3.1. Women should establish a correct view of marriage and family

Feudal ideas such as “favoring sons over daughters” and “men are superior to women” still have an impact on some women, especially in less developed regions. The status of women is not inherently inferior. Women should establish a correct self-awareness, break free from ideological constraints, recognize their own value, and spread the concept of gender equality^[8]. At the same time, marriage should not be used as a means to change one’s economic situation; economic independence can only be achieved by oneself. Establishing a progressive and independent view of marriage is conducive to achieving a harmonious family life.

3.2. Establish a sound legal system to protect women’s rights

The legal system is an important means to promote gender equality. Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, our country has enacted multiple laws, such as the “Marriage Law” and the “Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women”, achieving certain results in safeguarding women’s rights. However, at present, there are still issues such as restricted employment situations, and people should continue to improve the “Labor Law” to provide clearer legal guarantees for women’s employment rights and effectively solve the problem of employment discrimination.

3.3. Continuously develop and improve productivity

Engels pointed out that the root cause of the change in women’s status lies in private ownership, and

improving productivity is the foundation and prerequisite for women's liberation. The development of productive forces in capitalist societies has provided employment opportunities for women, enabling them to gradually awaken their resistance consciousness. China is still in the primary stage of socialism, with insufficiently developed productive forces. People must strive to liberate and develop productive forces to lay a material foundation for the complete liberation of women.

3.4. Women achieving economic independence

Economically oppressed women find it difficult to achieve true equality in marriage. Women are excluded from public labor due to the lack of exchange value in their domestic work, and thus lose their voice. Women should actively engage in social production, receive remuneration for their labor, break free from the economic subordinate position, and achieve economic independence^[9]. At the same time, they should change their employment concepts, improve their own qualities and educational level, participate in high-level social labor, and achieve their own value in a high-quality manner.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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