

## How Women Make Capitalism Possible and Other Feminist Shades of Socialism: On Eleanor Marx, Mrs Engels, and the Paris Commune

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"Not since Mary Wollstonecraft," claims Rachel Holmes in her brilliant biography *Eleanor Marx: A Life*, had "any woman made such a profound, progressive contribution to English political thought -- and action." In yet another excavation of a crucial historical female figure discarded by our canonical chroniclers to languish in obscurity, Holmes restores the importance of one woman's contribution to our collective history, limns the roots of feminism, and paints a vivid tableau of a revolutionary family and era. She shows how Karl Marx's youngest daughter was paramount in promoting and implementing her father's political and social vision, deftly demonstrating a "dynamic pattern between philosopher father and political daughter [...] Karl Marx was the theory; Eleanor Marx was the practice."

Born in 1855 in London, Eleanor, nicknamed "Tussy," youngest of Karl Marx and Jenny von Westphalen's six children (only three daughters survived to adulthood), was heir to her father's genius and grew up to become one of the most renowned socialist activists of her time. She began her career as her father's chief researcher and amanuensis, immersed in his conviction that most European governments were run on behalf of the ruling class while claiming to represent the common interest, and that a working-class revolution was both necessary and inevitable. She began actively organizing the working class in protest against capitalist exploitation, demanding 8-hour workdays, access to education, universal suffrage, and an end to child labor. An immensely popular public orator, she once addressed a crowd of 250,000 people. A prominent leader of the new trade unionism, her work and influence would lead to the establishment of an independent British labor party.

Tussy -- she insisted on being so called -- was also a prolific writer, her subjects ranging from political manifestos to theater reviews to exposés of prostitution and sex slavery. Her copious translations from both German and French included the first, much-praised translation of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. She counted among her friends some of the finest minds of her generation: George Bernard Shaw, Olive Schreiner, Henry Havelock Ellis, William Morris, May Morris, Elizabeth Garret Anderson, Sylvia Pankhurst, Amy Levy, Israel Zangwill, among many others.

What defined Eleanor Marx's socialism above all else was feminism. Infused in everything she did was the conviction that only when the position of women was reformed would the world follow suit. Seven years before Tussy was born, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels stated in *The Communist Manifesto* that bourgeois marriage was sanctified prostitution and that it was essential "to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production." Tussy

realized that women were a globally oppressed economic and social class exploited by capitalism conjoined with patriarchy. Women's suffrage and access to education were crucial but would not fully address the underlying structural problem of sexual inequality. She steadfastly believed, Holmes says, "Either men and women both are free, or no one is."

Tussy's childhood was a chaotic mix of bohemian and bourgeois. Though her mother had renounced her aristocratic Prussian roots and the family often risked poverty waiting for their benefactor Engels's next generous contribution, an appreciation of the finer things was never fully eschewed. Reformers and revolutionaries were a staple in their sitting room, and, whenever the means were available, the champagne flowed. Karl was obsessed with Shakespeare; entertainment in their home mostly consisted of sonnet and soliloquy recitations and performances of the plays. Engels, often present at the house, took a particular shine to Tussy. She occasionally visited him and his lover, Mary Burns, in Manchester. Mary and her sister Lizzie, Irish working-class reformers and Fenian activists, deeply influenced Tussy, who remained an avid, life-long supporter of the Irish Republican cause.

In 1871, when Tussy was 16, the first and only attempt at a proletarian revolution in nineteenth-century Europe occurred. A government made up mostly of skilled workers, craftsmen, and, notably, women, the Paris Commune was voted in on March 26 and violently ousted in May during *La Semaine Sanglante* (the Bloody Week), when more than 20,000 Communards were slaughtered. Many fled to England; a large proportion of them passing through the Marx household. "The Paris Commune," writes Holmes, "was a Marx family matter." Karl was implicated by all and sundry as being responsible. Both of Tussy's sisters were married to Frenchmen who actively supported the Commune. Tussy fell madly in love with one of the Paris refugees, Prosper Lissagaray, who wrote a first-hand account of his experiences, which she then helped him expand and translate into English. *History of the Paris Commune of 1871* remains the primary historical account and source of Communard history.

The Paris Commune, due to the substantial participation of women at all levels, was a "landmark in the history of the emancipation of women." The Commune rigorously maintained the centrality of women's equality as a necessary precondition of democracy. Holmes writes: "Coming of age in the epoch of the Commune, encountering all its challenges and contradictions, Tussy was presented with alternative versions of femininity and possibilities of the life of woman."

Though mired in the patriarchal practices of their times, Karl and Jenny tried to raise their daughters no differently than they would have their sons. But models are stronger than beliefs - their mother served their father and everywhere around them women served men. Referring to Jenny Marx and her life-long servant and friend Helen Demuth, Holmes writes:

For every hundred meals they cooked, Marx and Engels expressed an idea; for every basket of petticoats, bibs and curtains they sewed together, Marx and Engels wrote an article. For every pregnancy, childbirth and labour-intensive period of raising an infant, Marx and Engels wrote a book.

Tussy's two older sisters, though highly educated and feminist, devoted their adult lives to their husbands' careers and childrearing. Tussy, seeing what became of her mother and sisters, avoided their fate by putting off marriage and children, but ended up falling in love with and disastrously attaching herself to Edward Aveling. A like-minded radical political activist, playwright, and freethinker, G.B. Shaw described him as "a pleasant fellow who would have gone to the stake for Socialism or Atheism, but with absolutely no conscience in his private life. He seduced every woman he met, and borrowed from every man." Aveling's relentless financial and emotional exploitation of Tussy helped lead to her early death.

Throughout her career Tussy kept returning to the founding texts of socialism in order to "review what they had to say about sexual oppression and the equality of women." She particularly admired the pioneering work of Charles Fourier and his tenet that "the extension of the privileges of women is the fundamental cause of all social progress." A foundational precept of her father's and Engels's work, it was also the assumption of Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), John Stuart Mill's *Subjection of Women* (1869), and August Bebel's *Woman and Socialism* (1879). Male intellectuals and artists such as George Bernard Shaw, Havelock Ellis, Heinrich Ibsen, and even Aveling were outspoken feminists whose genuine interest in challenging universal patriarchy became an outstanding aspect of their work. Their example, observes Holmes, is a shocking demonstration of "the degree to which the active inclusion and participation of men in feminism later got lost, or went missing, after the First World War."

Women and men, Tussy believed, must work together to confront the issue of women's oppression in society. Putting theory to practice, she and Edward penned a feminist manifesto, "The Woman Question: from a Socialist Point of View," in which socialist feminist theory is accompanied, in Tussy tradition, with a concrete plan of action. They argue that because of the incongruity of male and female lives, "the life of the race is stunted" and that women's equality is "not just integral or desirable, but a precondition for the progress of meaningful social change." Sexual inequality, the treatise forcefully asserts, is essentially a question of economics. Women earning lower salaries than men for the same job doesn't mean men simply make more money; the practice ensures lower salaries in general so greater profits can go to the employers. Holmes sums up the thesis: "Inequality between men and women in the workplace did not just favor or support capitalism, *it made capitalism possible.*" The pamphlet became the founding text of socialist feminism in Western thought.

With the advent of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, Marxist socialism became equated in Western consciousness with fascism, and global commodity capitalism became the only viable economic system. Holmes, in the conclusion of her book, urges us to reflect upon the fact that the radical politics Eleanor Marx and her internationalist colleagues fought for so energetically gave Western democracies freedoms and benefits such as the eight-hour workday, access to education, freedom of expression, trade unions, and universal suffrage -- i.e., the underpinnings of a strong civil society. But what Holmes's book on Eleanor Marx most eloquently and critically reminds us is that at the "heart of every imaginative act and movement for social and economic change" is feminism.

□ After living my lifetime in a culture in which "Marxism" was the equivalent of a dirty word outside of academia, it has been refreshing of late to see the term appearing in more considered contexts across the media. Novelists too have recognized the birth of Marxism as relatively unmined imaginative territory. Two recent titles in this category are *Mrs. Engels* by Gavin McCrea and Lydia Syson's young adult novel *Liberty's Fire*, set during the Paris Commune of 1871.

McCrea's novel is told in the voice of Lizzie Burns, an Irish Mancunian mill worker and slum dweller who becomes lover then wife to Friedrich Engels. She inherits the position from her sister Mary, who lived in free union with Engels until she died in childbirth. Though I found McCrea's depiction of Victorian England colorful, and his re-creation of the Marx-Engels ménage persuasive, Lizzie herself was disappointing, her "feisty" nature and creature-comfort ambitions all too predictable. McCrea stresses Lizzie's illiteracy, her dislike and distrust of Jenny Marx, her problematic housekeeping, and her tepid interest in Engels's work. In contrast, Holmes convincingly posits in her biography that the Burns sisters were central in shaping Engels's political consciousness, his *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) written very much under their influence. According to Holmes, Lizzie Burns was "a dedicated player in the Irish Republican movement," her Fenian activism a key component in Eleanor Marx's own political formation. McCrea's novel relegates Lizzie's interest in Irish independence to a weak star-crossed love intrigue. Engels comes off unfairly as paternalistic and patronizing, his interest in the Burns sisters primarily sexual.

"Eleanor Marx's Lissagaray translation was an absolute key source for me," says Lydia Syson, author of *Liberty's Fire*, a thrilling, daring love story set against the backdrop of the Paris Commune. Known for bringing neglected historical periods to life for her teenage audience, Syson's passionate account of the lives of four youths during those dramatic seventy-two days in 1871 is a riveting yarn. With bullets flying and hearts throbbing, she lucidly portrays the historical context and complications, the high hopes and thwarted aims of the first democratically elected socialist government, and its rapid unravelling. Seamlessly and refreshingly integrated into the taught plot is the ample participation of women -- leaders and populace alike -- in the Commune. She also weaves into the story numerous issues facing women, such as poverty, prostitution, and political disenfranchisement, all of which reverberate with our own times. A wonderful, inspiring Commune leader known as the "Red Virgin" pops up throughout the novel; we learn in Syson's Historical Afterward that she is based on the real-life revolutionary Louise Michel. In 1890 Michel fled Paris for London to escape police harassment, founding an international anarchist school in Fitzroy Street where Syson's great-great-grandmother taught. The story of Michel's heroics was the spark igniting Syson's novel. *Vive les grand-mères!*

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