

THE FEMINISM OF ENGELS IN THE ORIGIN OF THE FAMILY, PRIVATE PROPERTY AND THE STATE

Helena Aguirre Horno

Student of Primary Education. University of the Basque Country. (EHU-UPV)

One year after the death of Karl Marx (1818-1883), Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) published *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*¹. The aim of Engels' work is in line with the famous Eleventh Feuerbach Thesis, in which it is not enough to analyse or interpret the world, as philosophers had done up to then, but rather we must transform it. For this, there is nothing better than to demonstrate that the foundations of the bourgeois world – the monogamous family, private property and the State – are nothing more than historic forms and final episodes of the capitalist system. In *The Origin...* Engels uses the concepts of “savagery”, “barbarism” and “civilization” to describe both the formation and development of the different forms of family and property, and also to describe the formation of the State. Lewis H. Morgan had used this terminology in his 1877 work *Ancient society*², which Karl Marx himself had read and commented on, and which also had a great impact on Engels in so far as it confirmed his materialist analysis of history, and also because Morgan established a correlation between the means of production and the different forms of the family. Although Engels' work was to be surpassed by the development of anthropological research in the decades that followed, there are some valuable aspects which it maintains³, in particular its author's *avant la lettre* feminism, a rarity at that time, even

within the field of socialism⁴. I will deal with this subject in the following paragraphs.

In *The Origin...* Engels revisits two aspects of Morgan's work which are in line with his revolutionary objective: firstly, the contrast between the classless nature of primitive society and the class society of the civilized age; and secondly, the image of a primitive society characterised by relationships of kin which had evolved from matriarchy to patriarchy, which in his opinion had meant the subjugation of women. One of the fundamental aims of Engels' book is precisely to show that the monogamous family, as with private property and the State, is not the definitive form but only one form of the family which will be overcome by the defeat of capitalism and the triumph of socialism. Engels predicts that, following the fall of capitalism, a society will emerge, similar in many ways to primitive societies, but without the shortcomings of those societies. Consequently, Engels' book does not share the evolutionist optimism of its time, something reflected in the quotation from Morgan at the end of *The Origin...*: “It will be a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient peoples”. Engels predicts that in the new socialist society, women will be freed from the oppression which they have suffered throughout civilization. Let us examine this point in more detail.

1 Full title: *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State: in the Light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan; in the original German: Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats: Im Anschluss an Lewis H. Morgan's Forschungen*. The English edition is available at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/origin_family.pdf

2 The work is available at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/morgan-lewis/ancient-society/>

3 Duque (2008: 37-38) has observed in Engels' work an early cultural relativism and a clear feminist attitude. However, together with these virtues, he has also observed a variety of mistakes originating from the state of the development of knowledge at the time and the author's own revolutionary affiliations. Cf. Duque (2008: 25-34).

4 Varela and Santolaya (2018: 116) have called the relationship between feminism and Marxism “a bad marriage”. It should be pointed out, however, that the Marxist tradition, in origin, assumes the struggle for women's liberation. In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* Marx and Engels state that the dominant class oppresses women in society and in the family, and that the communist aim is, precisely, their liberation: “The bourgeois sees his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and, naturally, can come to no other conclusion that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to the women. He has not even a suspicion that the real point aimed at is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production” (p. 25).

According to Engels, what did the formation of a civilised society mean to the lives of women? Throughout the second chapter, entitled “The Family”, Engels attributes the oppression of women to the appearance of a class society and the nuclear family, forms which he sees as being closely linked – Engels connects the private ownership of cattle with the necessity to produce a male heir. Engels believes that the birth of the nuclear family, therefore, does not respond to natural conditions but to economic ones, and specifically to the triumph of private property over primitive communal property. Consequently, in his opinion, the supposed progress from barbarism to civilization was beneficial for the male but detrimental to women. In this respect, it is worth noting the attention Engels pays in *The Origin...* to the oppression of women within the family framework and their submission to their husbands, something unheard of in previous societies, which leads Engels to describe the emergence of the nuclear family as “the world historical defeat of the female sex” (p. 30). Engels also claims that rape and violence against women began within the origins of the family itself: “The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude, she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children” (p. 30). Or, as he states further on: “Such a form of family shows the transition of the pairing family to monogamy. In order to make certain of the wife’s fidelity and therefore of the paternity of the children, she is delivered over unconditionally into the power of the husband; if he kills her, he is only exercising his rights” (p. 31). Marx had already written in *The German Ideology* that, “the first division of labour is that between man and woman for the propagation of children” (p. 35), to which Engels adds that “The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male. Monogamous marriage was a great historical step forward; nevertheless, together with slavery and private wealth, it opens the period that has lasted until today in which every step forward is also relatively a step backward, in which prosperity and development for some is won through the misery and frustration of others” (p. 35). Engels goes so far as to state that “within the family he is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat” (p. 39).

Consequently, Engels blames the nuclear family for the subjugation that women suffer within the family. But does Engels hold out any hope that one day the situation of women could change? True to his beliefs, in his work Engels idealizes the situation of the working woman and

prophesies the liberation of women in a future communist society. However, experience has shown us that in communist countries of the twentieth century, the subjugation of women was no less than in capitalist countries. In my opinion, the greatest criticism which can be levelled at *The Origin...* from a feminist viewpoint, is that Engels was incapable of seeing that the subjugation of women cannot be explained purely in terms of production, but rather makes up a separate plane which requires its own analysis and its own method of struggle. In other words: Engels' idea that the oppression of women would disappear with the elimination of bourgeois society is wrong, for the simple reason that the two phenomena – the means of production and the subjugation of women – are not necessarily linked, nor do they correspond to the same criteria. In fact, the early integration of women into the socialist world in many cases meant a double subjugation: in the factory and in the home. In any case, it must be recognised that this does not diminish Engels' contribution to the feminist struggle, given that he understood the terrible subjugation of the women of his time, he understood that this situation of submission occurred largely within the family itself, and lastly, he understood that women's fight for their liberation deserved the support of men and of the socialist struggle.

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