

# Not just a Woman. The Agitation Tour in the US and the Proletarian Feminism of Eleanor Marx

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Submitted: June 7, 2022 – Accepted: July 4, 2022 – Published: September 12, 2022


## Abstract

On 31 August 1886 Eleanor Marx left Liverpool for Chicago for a trip that would be the perfect occasion to sharpen her feminist thought. Inquiring the American workers movement and women condition, Eleanor found the problem of the day. “How should woman organize?” became the crucial question of her socialist activism among women but also among men. The United States were the ground of an essential transformation of socialist politics, where sex, class and race were already political weapons the workers movement had to learn to use for their own freedom.

**Keywords:** Eleanor Marx; American Workers Movement; Socialism; Feminism; Organization.

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The life of woman does not coincide with that of man. Their lives do not intersect; in many cases do not even touch. Hence the life of the race is stunted.<sup>1</sup>

1877 has been defined as the year of the American workers' insurrection.<sup>2</sup> Almost ten years later, the agitation was still not over. Unprecedented forms of organization involving women arose in 1886, transforming workers' organizations from the inside.<sup>3</sup> When the national strike for the eight-hour working day was called on May 1st of that year, Eleanor Marx had already been following the events of the American working class for some time, immersed in her many literary and political commitments in London. The bomb that exploded on May 4, during what became known as the Haymarket Riot, had turned Chicago upside down at a time when the trade union struggle had become increasingly political and expansive.<sup>4</sup>

Eleanor's trip to the United States was motivated from the very beginning by a keen interest in American working class movement. Women were in conditions of exploitation that, in her opinion, were even worse than those in England and yet were struggling to emerge, inside and outside the factories. It seemed to her increasingly urgent and necessary to direct workers' struggle towards the organization of socialism. For this reason, Eleanor's political activism and discourse on women became radicalized during her stay in the United States. The problems posed by women in union organizing and the issues related to marriage and divorce prompted Eleanor, in her texts following the American tour, to articulate the "woman question" more and more as a "feminist question:"<sup>5</sup> that is, not only a matter of equal opportunity among men and women, but of social revolution, and of transforming sexual and class relations together.

Of course, Eleanor's political background influenced strongly her reading of American reality. Before her American tour, started in 1886, Eleanor had been an agitator, a scholar, and a theatre enthusiast. In 1884 she joined the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) led by Henry Hyndman and was elected a member of its executive, and there she met her future partner, Edward Aveling. After only one year, her relationship with Hyndman became very conflictual, mainly due to his nationalist tendencies. Eleanor and some other members left SDF to establish the Socialist League, which included prominent characters such as William Morris, Ernest Belfort Bax, Sam Mainwaring, and Tom Mann, the latter two being official representatives of the working class. Until 1884, however, her studies had focused mainly on her father's work, reconstructing his political oeuvre and pursuing the heart of Marxian discourse in her activism. That year she had the opportunity to know Clementina Black and enter the Women's Trade Union League.<sup>6</sup> However, as one can see from reading *The Factory Hell* (1885), a specific analysis of women's condition was still absent in her reflection. Her critique of suffragism and bourgeois feminism, which she shared with Clara Zetkin, primarily noted the class division among women, but that was the outcome of considerations she made after the International Socialist Congress in Paris, which she helped organize, and the US tour.

In the *Woman Question* (1886), in particular, she wrote that the fight for the vote was a limited goal if it was only a right for the rich, and it could not include the large-scale social revolution needed to bring about a different future society. This analysis finds stronger confirmation after her US trip:

We will support all women, not only those having property, enabled to vote; the Contagious Diseases Act repealed; every calling thrown open to both sexes. The actual position of women in respect to men would not be very vitally touched [...] For not one of these

1. Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx Aveling, "Woman Question," *Westminster Review*, 125(1886): 5.

2. Jeremy Brecher, *Strike! History of Mass Revolts in America in the Last Century* (Boston: South End Press, 1999), 55; Jack Ross, *The Socialist Party of America: A Complete History* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Press, 2015) in particular 3–79, 16.

3. Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870–1920* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1983).

4. Brecher, *Strike!*, 46ff.

5. The phrase is borrowed from Heidi I. Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," *Capital & Class*, 3(1979): 2.

6. On the WTUL, see Philip Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From the First Trade Unions to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1982), 120–32.

things, save indirectly the Contagious Diseases Act, touches them in their sex relations. [...] Without larger social change women will never be free.<sup>7</sup>

*Factory Hell*, written the year before the trip to the States, as well as the review of Bebel's *Woman in the Past, Present and Future*<sup>8</sup> and *The Working Class Movement in England*, written in 1884, named women as a harassed part of the working class, described their additional exploitation, but within a discourse about workers, "men and women." In all the following writings,<sup>9</sup> the social condition of women, their relationship with men and their access to the working-class organization and the family institutions are more widely reconsidered.

Rachel Holmes has written that "Eleanor's experience of America broadened, educated and confirmed her critical assessment of the political possibilities of an integrated socialist and feminist program for revolution. [...] the first statements of socialist feminism in Western thought, and the first on both sides of the Atlantic."<sup>10</sup> Certainly the United States, even more than England, had shown Eleanor that the women's question had to go beyond the claim for women's rights. The point to her was women's participation in the socialist struggle. The risk was not only that the exclusion of women would become an obstacle for the socialist cause, but above all that by excluding working class women, feminism would become an enemy of the workers' cause.

On August 31, 1886, she left Liverpool for Chicago with her partner Edward Aveling and her friend Wilhelm Liebknecht, despite the fact that the Socialist American Labor Party had officially invited only the latter two.<sup>11</sup> This showed not only that she carried with her a cumbersome family name, but also that evident misogyny was not foreign to the socialist environment. We can therefore imagine that it was no coincidence that Eleanor's first lecture on September 14 in Bridgeport, Connecticut focused on women's conditions and the urgency of women's union organizing for the success of socialism.

In this sense, her socialism is her father's legacy that she carried on with dedication: just like for Karl Marx "feminine ferment," i.e., any public expression of women's insubordination was essential to create the conditions for revolution.<sup>12</sup> For Eleanor, however, the organization of women, within the framework of the labor movement, was needed to break the noxious connection between capitalism and "the positions of the two sexes to-day."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, throughout her political, literary and personal engagement, the condition and struggle of women have been central. Reading her speeches, to which we will return in a moment, we can see a reversal of the traditional socialist perspective: social change would not bring freedom to women, but women, by claiming their freedom, that is by organizing themselves, would bring about a social change: "women and the immediate producers, must understand that their emancipation will come from themselves."<sup>14</sup> A few years after the American tour, she therefore stressed the importance of a common and shared organization of working women and men:

1. Wherever women organize, their position improves—that is, wages go up, hours are reduced, working conditions are improved. 2. It works to the advantage of the men at least as much as of the women when the latter organize, and their wages are regarded as real workers' wages and not as little supplements to the general household fund. Except in quite special trades, it is essential, in the case of unskilled workers especially, that men

7. Aveling and Marx Aveling, "Woman Question," 14.

8. Eleanor Marx Aveling, "Review of Bebel's 'Woman in the Past, Present and Future,'" *Supplement to The Commonwealth*, 1(1885): 63–4.

9. I refer in particular to *The Woman Question* and *The American Working Class Movement*, written with Edward Aveling, but also to the articles written with Clara Zetkin for the *Arbeiterinnen-Zeitung* in 1892 to which we return later.

10. Rachel Holmes, *Eleanor Marx. A Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 292.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Eleonora Cappuccilli and Roberta Ferrari, "The Feminine Ferment Marx and the Critique of Patriarchy," in *Global Marx History and Critique of the Social Movement in the World Market*, eds. Matteo Battistini, Eleonora Cappuccilli, Maurizio Ricciardi, (Boston: BRILL, 2022), 58–73.

13. Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx Aveling, "Shelley and Socialism," *To-Day* (April 1888): 103–116.

14. Aveling and Marx Aveling, "Woman Question," 3.

and women be members of one and the same trade-union, just as they are members of one and the same workers' party.<sup>15</sup>

The problem and contradiction at the heart of all Eleanor's work and life was the question of how a specific women's struggle could be waged within the framework of a necessary and inescapable common working-class and socialist struggle. Looking at the social and political status of women, the different ways in which they were exploited and subordinated in the workplace, the subjugation imposed by marriage, and the instrumentalization of the woman's body and motherhood, Eleanor showed how women's economic dependence not only exacerbated that of all wage laborers but had in addition a traditional and moral root. The position of the working woman was the lever of her own exploitation, and not just her own: what she represented at the social and family level determined her economic value, the importance of her work, and her possibility of action and organization. Eleanor provided a picture of a society in which the role of women did not represent a merely cultural issue, nor only an inescapable "economic fact" of the capitalist system: the woman, as we will see, is also an expropriated subject, who lives the melancholic negation of her desire and ideals. In this respect, she pioneered a working-class feminism that aimed to liberate women not only from capitalist oppression but also from the causes and consequences of that oppression. Holmes also wrote that "Eleanor Marx radicalized 'the woman question' by bringing modern feminism to Britain in 1886. She created the political philosophy of socialist feminism."<sup>16</sup>

The American tour is the moment of greatest development of her discourse. The tour begins with her rally on the "woman question" and ends with her speech on the question of women's organization on December 23, 1886, both of which were later included in *The Working-Class Movement in America* published in the *Westminster Review* and co-signed with Edward Aveling.

## 1 How Should Women Organize

Eleanor was fiercely critical of British bourgeois feminism, led by "refined suffragettes of the type of Mrs. Fawcett" ("the reactionary bourgeois advocate of women's rights—of the rights of property-owning women—who has never worked a day in her life").<sup>17</sup> Women like her were convinced that "the poor should stay in their place,"<sup>18</sup> since while they fought for the vote for women, they did not care about how many of them could exercise it: "Has not the star of the women's rights movement, Mrs. Fawcett, declared herself expressly in opposition to any legal reduction of working hours for female workers?"<sup>19</sup> At the same time, she considered American feminism "ready to engage in the more far-reaching struggle for the emancipation of the workers as well as that for their own sex," capable of a "wider view of the contest for liberty."<sup>20</sup> This judgment underlines her radical ideas on society, even though in the short time she spent in the United States she did not come into contact with those American feminists engaged on various social and political fronts, such as Jane Addams and Elisabeth Cady Stanton. Similarly, she did not appear to have contacted socially or politically engaged feminists in Britain.<sup>21</sup> This fact can be explained not only by her firm commitment to her father's cause, but also by the critical approach she had towards a feminism that did not consider class

15. Eleanor Marx, "How Should we Organize?," *Arbeiterinnen-Zeitung*, February 5, 1892, 4.

16. Holmes, *Eleanor Marx. A Life*, 32.

17. Eleanor Marx, "A Women's Trade Union," *Arbeiterinnen-Zeitung*, May 20, 1892. About Millicent Fawcett and Sophia A. Van Wingerden, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999); Anna Rossi-Doria, *La libertà delle donne* (Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1990); Elda Guerra, *Storia e cultura politica delle donne* (Bologna: Archetipolibri, 2008).

18. Yvonne Kapp, *Eleanor Marx. II. The Years of Engagement (1884–1898)*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1980), 473.

19. Eleanor Marx, "Women's Trade Unions in England," *Arbeiterinnen-Zeitung*, (1892), 2.

20. Eleanor Marx Aveling and Edward Aveling, *The Working-Class Movement in America* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co, 1891), 58.

21. The published biographies and works on Eleanor Marx do not report on consolidated relationships with women's associations in the UK and England, even if she had several occasions to discuss with prominent activists, such as Beatrice Potter Webb, suffragists, and women trade unionists. On the American debate, see *Il sentimento delle libertà. La Dichiarazione di*

difference as politically crucial. Eleanor's socialist commitment was also a strict discriminating point in her conception of women and feminism, even more so given that Millicent Fawcett, whom she identified as the star of the women's movement, did not represent all British suffragism. Eleanor's feminism therefore was a part of her socialist politics, as demonstrated by her collaboration with the German socialist Clara Zetkin, with whom, in 1896, she brought women onto the agenda of the international socialist movement at the first congress of the Second International in London.<sup>22</sup>

In her perspective, even American feminism was unable to recognize the different conditions of women and to see that women workers posed the more general problem of social change: "The woman question is one of the organization of society as a whole. American woman-suffragists are like the English in the fact that they are, as a rule, well to do. And they are like them in that they make no suggestion for change that is outside the limits of the society of today."<sup>23</sup> For her, it was not a matter of denying the political and social difference that runs and is reproduced on the line of sex. As the quote in the exergue makes clear, Eleanor was all too aware of this. It was a question, however, of starting from the women workers, because their condition showed in the most evident way how the relationship between the sexes concealed an essential lever of exploitation and at the same time a weak point of the workers' organization.

During their tour through 35 American cities and towns from New York to Kansas City, Eleanor and Aveling interviewed American working men and women with the precise and determined aim of understanding the workers' context and problems. Also, their goal was the dissemination of a socialism that, in their opinion, American workers had never heard of in that form, cleared up from prejudices and misunderstandings. Up to that moment, socialism in the US had been, from what they could witness, an exported socialism, dominated by the German model with no particular attention to the American reality, and cleverly denigrated by the local press:<sup>24</sup> as long as this situation remained so, "the movement in America will not be American. Socialism, to be effective there, must be of native growth, even if the seeds are brought from other countries."<sup>25</sup> It was also necessary to consider that "in America there seems to be no social and intellectual middle class." This statement should be read together with the following explanation of American capitalism, which concerns not only the economic and sociological character of the middle class, but its political intermediation between capital and labor:

There are in America far more trenchant distinctions between the capitalist and laboring class than in the older lands. This distinction is not, as in the latter, bridged over and refined down by many examples of intermediate classes. [...] The capitalist system came here as a ready-made article.<sup>26</sup>

What was missing in this description was the complex social stratification that in Europe allowed for a mediation between social classes, which here instead found themselves facing each other.<sup>27</sup>

The problem with this interpretation is twofold: first, from their report, all we know is that they met "Knights of Labor, Central Labor Union men, and members of other working-class organizations,"

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*Seneca Falls e il dibattito sui diritti delle donne negli Stati Uniti di metà Ottocento*, ed. Raffaella Baritono (Torino: La Rosa, 2002). This lack of knowledge of US women's activism explains the discrepancies between her polemical analysis of the concrete articulations of sex and class. Indeed, there was a tradition dating back to the early 19th century that saw the formation of working women organizations, strikes and struggles that also conquered the support or at least the solidarity of suffragists *America's Working Women: A Documentary History, 1600 to the Present*, eds. Linda Gordon and Rosalyn Baxandall (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 152–189.

22. Holmes, *Eleanor Marx. A Life*, 11, 273–274.

23. Marx Aveling and Aveling, *The Working-Class Movement in America*, 58.

24. For a broader overview of the topic see John H.M. Laslett and Seymour Martin Lipset, *Failure of a Dream? Essays in the History of American Socialism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

25. Marx Aveling and Aveling, *The Working-Class Movement in America*, 44.

26. *Ibid.*, 4.

27. See in this regard Matteo Battistini, *Middle Class: An Intellectual History through Social Sciences. An American Fetish from its Origins to Globalization* (Boston: BRILL, 2022).

and we do not have more specific information about the other organizations they had the possibility to meet. Second, Marx and Aveling's considerations concerned a specific period of the socialist movement in the Gilded Age, when the SLP was facing an important crisis and became very insular in its organization.<sup>28</sup> Also, they did not consider the role that immigrant communities played in spreading socialism in U.S.<sup>29</sup> In short, here we see the limitations of Marx and Aveling knowledge and understanding of the history and transformations of the socialist movement in U.S.

Nevertheless, they could recognize the characteristics of the American system of exploitation, the truck order or scrip system, the sweating system,<sup>30</sup> the unparalleled intensification of work that anticipated Taylorism. Eleanor was able to identify their maximum expression in the condition of women workers. Observing how essential women's wage labor was for the American capitalist, Eleanor showed its non-accessory political significance and the contradictory nature of a system founded on the family but unable to guarantee its reproduction.

Everywhere in America today [...] we found women forced to work for wages because the husband's were insufficient for even bare subsistence, besides having to tend their children, and go the usual dreary round of endless household drudgery. [...] we may fairly say we have never in the English Manchester seen women so worn out and degraded, such famine in their cheeks, such need and oppression, starving in their eyes, as in the women we saw trudging to their work in the New Hampshire Manchester. What must the children born of such women be?<sup>31</sup>

Eleanor's argument was that women should not organize separately, because their organization can and should benefit the whole labor movement. However, whether they were *surplus women*<sup>32</sup> or married women, she recognized that within the labor movement, their struggle was isolated, when not marginalized or denied altogether. Eleanor noted that many women worked to survive or to make an essential contribution to a meager family income. The social delegitimization of the working woman therefore also passed through that contradiction. Women's work, in fact, was not "real" work for the society of the time, neither for the capitalist, nor the trade unionist, nor the worker, nor, last but not least, for her husband: it was the necessary evil in a transitory phase of a woman's life, waiting for marriage to save her. More and more often, however, this waiting became a chronic precariousness and, married or not, women continued to work.<sup>33</sup> "It must be understood that they are not abandoned women, but are really working women."<sup>34</sup> The family was not therefore the only destiny of proletarian women, but rather a place where that division and isolation were reaffirmed. Working women were not a residual condition affecting only those who had contravened their presumed destiny of marriage, but a condition entirely internal to that of the working class.

In the 1880s and 1890s, in fact, 85% of women workers were unmarried, very young and employed on temporary contracts in unskilled jobs and in sectors hard to organize by trade unions. One-third of them were "domestic servants" and a quarter were workers in the textile industry. The rest were divided and scattered among various industrial, shoe, tobacco, and service departments of various kinds. Half of the female working class were migrants,<sup>35</sup> an aspect Eleanor always held in high regard,

28. Timothy Messer-Kruse, *The Yankee International: Marxism and the American Reform Tradition, 1848–1876* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); John Nichols, *The 'S' Word: a Short History of an American Tradition... Socialism* (London and New York: Verso 2011); Mark A. Lause, *The Long Road to Harpers Ferry: The Rise of the First American Left* (London: Pluto Press, 2018). See also Arnaldo Testi, *L'età progressista negli Stati Uniti* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1984).

29. Paul Buhle, *History of Marxism in the US* (London-New York: Verso, 1987). See also the recently published E. Marx, *iSempre adelante! Escritos y cartas, 1866-1897* (Banda propria, 2022).

30. Laura Hapke, *Sweatshop: The History of An American Idea* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

31. Marx Aveling and Aveling, *The Working-Class Movement in America*, 21.

32. See in this regard Roberta Ferrari, *Beatrice Potter e il capitalismo senza civiltà. Una donna tra scienza, politica e amministrazione* (Roma: Viella, 2017).

33. Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History* (Chicago, IL: Illinois Press, 2007), 98–115.

34. Marx Aveling and Aveling, *The Working-Class Movement in America*.

35. Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History*, 22.

both in her discourse on women's organization and as part of her internationalist vision of socialism, and because of her passionate affection for the Irish cause.<sup>36</sup>

In order to report and criticize the widespread belief that, as temporary or complementary, women's work was not as "real" as men's—a belief that motivated the implicit answer to the question "Why don't women organize?"—the historian Alice Kessler-Harris rightly turned the question around, "where are the organized women workers?"<sup>37</sup> The enormous difficulties and barriers posed by unions and the male working class against women's organizing are not an issue addressed in detail by Eleanor who, while acknowledging this reality, posed an even more crucial question for the women of her time: "How should we organize?"

*The women unionists often have no voice in the administration of their union. [...] For example, in Lancashire and Yorkshire, where the women almost without exception belong to unions, pay regular dues and of course also draw benefits from them, they have absolutely no part in the leadership of these organizations, no voice in the administration of their own funds, and up to now have never become delegates to their own unions' congresses. Representation and administration lie wholly in the hands of the men workers.*<sup>38</sup>

Eleanor thus recognized male dominance in unions as a problem for the entire labor movement. The American female workforce was seen as a reserve army,<sup>39</sup> when in fact as she noted, in addition to breadwinner wives, many breadwinners were young single women, that is in every possible sense "real workers," supporting widowed mothers and younger sisters.

During this period, however, there had certainly been no shortage of struggles by women workers. In 1884 the textile workers and the following year the shirt makers of New York, men and women together, had gone on strike, winning higher wages and shorter hours. In the Knights of Labor, the strongest union federation at this time in history, there were 50,000 female members in nearly 200 women's assemblies. Women leaders, albeit with difficulty, were emerging, such as Leonora Barry, an Irish woman who emigrated to the United States and became the "master worker" of her assembly.<sup>40</sup>

The arguments used to delegitimize the importance of women's work, primarily the valorization of their role in the domestic and family sphere, were a double-edged sword for the workers' organization. Not only was the maternal and domestic role in which women were enclosed and oppressed the basis of the specific exploitation of women, but it also became the weapon with which entrepreneurs could impose workload and wage differences. Women workers had understood this mechanism, and for this reason their pressure inside the trade unions was essential, caused tensions, and forced changes. Women's struggle was always doubly demanding compared to that of male workers, since they were fighting on three different fronts: against tradition and the patriarchal system, against a process of accumulation and industrial expansion that could not exist without them, and against the trade unions' reservations based on the assumption that, as a poor and blackmailable workforce, they were automatically seen as a threat to workers' conquests and organization.<sup>41</sup>

Throughout her writings and during the rallies in which she participated Eleanor voiced these conditions, but despite this she never claimed a separate women's struggle: not only because of her dedication to the socialist cause, but because, as she wrote on several occasions, the women's question was a question not only for women but for society as a whole.

The problem of women's separate struggle, however, has to be understood also in the context of the American women's movement that saw it as a strategic choice, something that Eleanor did not consider at all. Eleanor saw that women's wage labor questioned the patriarchal organization of the family and

36. See Eleanor Marx, "The Irish Dynamiters," *Progress*, (May 1884).

37. *Ibid.*, 23–24.

38. Marx, "How Should We Organize?," 2.

39. Marilyn Power, "From Home Production to Wage Labor: Women as a Reserve Army of Labor," *Review of Radical Political Economy*, 15(1983): 71–91.

40. Susan Levine, "Labor's True Woman: Domesticity and Equal Rights in the Knights of Labor," *The Journal of American History*, 70(1983): 323–339; Siobhan Brown, *A Rebel's Guide to Eleanor Marx* (London: Bookmarks Publications, 2015): 29.

41. *Ibid.*

society. The economic dependence on men was the main problem to her, therefore she defined the woman question “one of economics and not of mere sentiment,”<sup>42</sup> was to all intents and purposes for women workers the most ferocious weapon through which their subordination was reproduced, at work and in society at *large*. Moreover, she firmly believed, and she found confirmation of this in the United States, that strikes and mixed forms of organization were possible and, given adequate political education, even probable: in New Jersey, women had organized and joined the Knights of Labor, who eventually accepted their participation. By working together, they were able to secure the same wages for women as for men.

Now, it seems to me that we must commence by organizing as *trade-unionists* using our united strength as a means of reaching the ultimate goal, the emancipation of our class. The job will not be easy. In fact, the conditions of female labor are such that it is often heartbreakingly difficult to make progress. But from day to day the job will become easier, and it will begin to look less and less difficult in proportion as the women and especially the men learn to see what strength lies in the unification of any *workers*.<sup>43</sup>

It was then a matter of showing that the construction of a socialist struggle implied the abandonment of traditions, the challenge to the patriarchal hierarchies reproduced by family, the economic and political understanding of the sexual division of labor as an essential moment of exploitation. Feminism, in other words, was not a mere cultural struggle or, as she defined it, one of “sentiment.”

## 2 The Necessary Unity of an Impossible Coincidence

Eleanor Marx’s struggle for free love and women’s independence, that is, the fight against the commodification of women, in her political and in her personal life,<sup>44</sup> led her to see with extreme clarity the political value of feminist freedom for socialist organization. To introduce a revolutionary discourse on women’s sexuality in the specific context of the working class meant to her to give legitimacy to a “sex instinct”<sup>45</sup> recognized by science and legalized by the state for men but not women. It was thus not just a matter of recognizing a two-dimensional, smooth, ripple-free antagonism, but of seeing, within the workforce, the barriers and projections of a male domination that, while supporting the oppression of all, traced an internal rift within the working class that could not simply be recomposed but neither could allow to abandon the ultimate purpose of a common struggle.

Were marriage or prostitution really the only possible forms of the workers’ relationship? What was the cause of this distorted “solidarity” of exploited labor? Eleanor’s political reflection attempts to connect the subjective and the collective dimensions of emancipation, and thus to read exploitation, male domination, and the socialist struggle against them first and foremost as a set of social relations to be fought and built inside the workers’ movement:

The man, worn out as he may be by labor, has the evening in which to do nothing. The woman is occupied until bedtime comes. Often with young children her toil goes far into, or all through, the night. When marriage has taken place, all is in favor of the one and is adverse to the other [...] Our marriages, like our morals, are based upon commercialism. Not to be able to meet one’s business engagements is a greater sin than the slander of a friend, and our weddings are business transactions.<sup>46</sup>

42. Marx Aveling and Aveling, *The Working-Class Movement in America*, 42.

43. Eleanor Marx, “How Should We Organize?,” 3.

44. Chushichi Tsuzuki, *Eleanor Marx. Una tragedia socialista* (Milano: Mondadori, 1972); Yvonne Kapp, *Eleanor Marx*; Edward P. Thompson, “Eleanor Marx”, in *Persons and Polemics. Historical Essays*, ed. Edward P. Thompson (London: Merlin Press 1994), 66–76. See also Roberta Ferrari, “Miss Marx. Film d’amore e socialismo,” *Ricerche di storia politica*, 2021: <https://www.arsp.it/2021/04/26/miss-marx-film-damore-e-socialismo-o-della-storia-politica-dellamore/>.

45. Marx Aveling and Aveling, “Woman Question,” 6. Karl Heinzen’s *The Rights of Women and the Sexual Relations* was already translated in English in 1875 by Emma Heller Schumm, an American lady of German descent. We can be sure Eleanor read that book, also because Heinzen had a quarrel with Karl Marx regarding the moral root of socialism in 1848.

46. Marx and Aveling, “Woman Question,” 6.



If marriage is a commercial transaction, how can it be possible for wife and husband to struggle together for their emancipation? Even in dealing with the issue of divorce, Eleanor gives expression to this dilemma. The commercial basis of marriage shapes also the freedom divorce can grant:

To oppose anything that facilitates divorce is a most serious interference with the liberty of the subject. The whole question of divorce, complex in any case, is made more complicated by the fact that it has to be considered, first in relation to the present conditions, second in relation to the socialistic conditions of the future. Many advanced thinkers plead for greater facility of divorce now. [...] and most important of all, that the conditions of divorce should be the same for the two sexes. All this is excellent, and would be not only feasible but just, if—but mark the if—the economic positions of the two sexes were the same. They are not the same. [...] The man would be able to take advantage of them; the woman would not, except in the rare instances where she had private property or some means of livelihood. The annulling of the union would be to him freedom; to her, starvation for herself and her children.<sup>47</sup>

Divorce could not be treated in isolation from its social consequences. While for some, divorce could guarantee freedom, for others, it had the cost of poverty. That is to say, for Eleanor there could be no universal discourse on women, because the social position that defined dependence on men split the “women’s class” in two. To claim women’s rights, then, was not enough, because often women’s rights did not consider the real conditions of existence of the subjects they speak of.

Whether we consider women as a whole, or only that sad sisterhood wearing upon its melancholy brews the stamp of eternal virginity, we find alike a want of ideas and of ideals. The reason of this is again the economic position of *dependency upon man*. Women, once more like the laborers, have been expropriated as to their rights as human beings, just as the laborers were expropriated as to their rights as producers. The method in each case is the only one that makes expropriation at any time and under any circumstances possible—and that method is force.<sup>48</sup>

To put desire, “a want of ideas and of ideals,” ahead of the melancholy of an imposed virginity meant radical opposition to male domination, to that power that was imposed on women to “belong,” it meant reappropriating a sexuality not defined by male conquest and dispossession.

Eleanor railed against bourgeois feminism because her aim was not to find a place for women in the existing society, but to overthrow its economic and political order, since patriarchy and capitalism never acted in isolation and therefore could not be fought separately.

However, she did not consider that divorce was no less problematic for middle-class women. The coverture system and the issue of child protection were no less stringent for middle-class women. Indeed, significantly, Eleanor’s political semantics do not name patriarchy and male domination but privilege a discourse on women’s conditions and their organization as working-class politics: “For this women’s-rightser as for this misogynist, ‘woman’ is just woman. Neither of them sees that there is the exploiter woman of the middle class and the exploited woman of the working class.”<sup>49</sup> There was no “woman question” from the bourgeois point of view any more than there was a man question. Nevertheless, she recognized that, where bourgeois women demanded rights that also served working class women, they could and would fight together. A contradiction remained thus open in Eleanor’s socialist discourse: her feminism always seemed on the point of conflicting with the crucial principle of the socialist cause, that of workers’ unity, of the universality of socialism, but at the same time she intended to use it as a weapon to empower workers. In this sense her experience in the US had made her more conscious of the need to articulate the problematic intersection among feminist and socialist causes, or better to define a socialist feminism.

47. Marx and Aveling, “Woman Question,” 7.

48. Ibid, 5.

49. Eleanor Marx, “Women’s Trade Unions in England;” Eleanor Marx Aveling, *The Working Class Movement in England* [1884] (London: Twentieth Century Press, 1896).

In the American movement she had recognized the strength of the “youthfulness of many of the working-class agitators and writers,” a generation of brilliant and cosmopolitan orators and activists, “as well as the various nationalities of the names we have given in these pages—e.g., Black, Morgan, Mielliez, Macdonald, McGuire, Hruza, Trautwein, Vrooman—show the *universality of the Socialist movement in America*, and tell of the certainty of its ultimate triumph.” This passionate search for universality, however, is also the most problematic element within her reflection on women and class struggle, of which in the United States she had been able to discover further differences, of race and citizenship. Universality had to be continually reconciled with the partiality that Eleanor recognized in the conditions and struggle of women. If against bourgeois feminism she affirmed, “for us there is only the working-class movement,” in her critique of society Eleanor recognized that the voice of women was continually marginalized, set aside, while morality supported the discourse of their social subordination, expropriating them: “To cultured people, public opinion is still that of man alone, and the customary is the moral.”<sup>50</sup> The allegedly natural vocation of woman was a necessary invention of this moral order. The truth was that there was no female vocation any more than there was a natural law of capitalist production.<sup>51</sup> Nature appeared as a cultural and political product, functional to the exploitation and subordination of women.

The clearest evidence of Eleanor’s American feminist turn with which we have introduced this essay lies in the speech she gave on November 8, 1886, at Aurora Turner Hall in Chicago, in which she addressed herself directly to working-class men and offered a different response to the well-known polemic found in Marx and Engels’ *Manifesto of the Communist Party*:

We are told that ‘socialists want to have women in common’. Such an idea is possible only in a state of society that looks upon woman as a commodity. Today, woman, alas, is only that. She has only too often to sell her womanhood for bread. But to the socialist a woman is a human being, and can no more be ‘held’ in common than a socialistic society could recognize slavery.<sup>52</sup>

It is not a matter of opposing the hypocritical and disguised bourgeois communality of women with a supposedly frank and free socialist communality, nor is it simply a matter of abolishing women as mere instruments of production, but of recognizing that when we speak of communality, we are in fact talking about possession, that even before being exploited producers, women are commodities. By restoring the subversive value of women’s freedom of desire, Eleanor rejected the male perspective that is convinced to be able to determine women’s position, behavior, or sex life.

And these virtuous men who speak of our wanting to hold women in common, who are they? The very men who debauch your wives and sisters and daughters. *Have you ever reflected, you working men, that the very wealth you create is used to debauch your own sisters and daughters, even your little children?* That is to me the most terrible of all the miseries of our modern society: that poor men should create the very wealth that is used by the man of ‘family and order’ to ruin the women of your class. We socialists, then, want common property in all means of production and distribution, and as woman is not a machine, but a human being, she will have her profits and her duties like men, but cannot be held by anyone as a piece of property.

Here she did not only polemicize against the bourgeoisie, as her father had already done, but she also turned on the workers, showing them how accepting the possession of women was functional to their own exploitation.

For her, women’s freedom and the power to end exploitation were inseparable, so she was able to point to the importance of women’s organization as an essential weapon against the capitalist system, a political weapon. Yet she became increasingly aware that there was an irremediable rift, on which her

50. Marx, “Women’s Trade Unions in England,” 3.

51. Ibid.

52. Knights of Labor, December 4, 1886. Quoted by Holmes, *Eleanor Marx*, 182.

political activity remained somewhat suspended. The rift between male workers and women workers, between the two sexes, was there and could no longer be denied. Her political militancy in the trade unions, her writings, and even her biography had been the strenuous and courageous attempt to suture this wound. However, her ultimate discovery, in her political and personal life, was that this was not possible; it was not even possible in her love affair with Aveling. Eleanor Marx's dramatic end is also a sign of this conscious difficulty that does not end with her.

The way Eleanor Marx articulated together the problems of the labor movement, organization and women's freedom contributed "to reshape the conventional concepts and narratives of labor history."<sup>53</sup> Her discussion of women workers articulates a critique of the conception of separate spheres and the terms in which domesticity and work have historically been given to women; she showed the political significance of wages<sup>54</sup> and gender relations. Her reflections on the union form are also important, insofar as her critique of a homogeneous and undifferentiated concept of class allowed her to see the union as a workers' weapon which, in order to be effective, would have had to definitively overcome its category divisions, the legacies of crafts,<sup>55</sup> and which only the organization of women, their internal pressure, could transform.

Her life, cut short by suicide, does not allow us to ascertain how Eleanor would have been able to hold together her support for trade union struggles with "the emancipation of women as an oppressed class."<sup>56</sup> We can only imagine that her socialism would have been challenged. At the same time, the connections she drew between workers' struggle and women's struggle, between class and gender, between capitalism and patriarchy would become crucial to future feminisms and political theory. However steadfast in her dedication to the workers' cause, however opposed to the separate organization of women, Eleanor Marx represents one of the figures of socialism on both sides of the Atlantic who were able to give voice to a critical discourse on women's oppression. She was also able to underline the importance of their autonomy and independence within the socialist struggle. Her feminism contained, moreover, the awareness of a contradiction that she had been able to identify, the necessity of workers' unity and the impossible coincidence between the sexes: "Women will find allies in the better sort of men, as the laborers are finding allies among the philosophers, artists, and poets. *But the one has nothing to hope from man as a whole, and the other has nothing to hope from the middle class as a whole.*"<sup>57</sup>

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53. Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 4.

54. Alice Kessler-Harris, *Woman's Wage. Historical Meanings and Social Consequences* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 6–33.

55. Ferdinando Fasce, *Dal mestiere alla catena. Lavoro e controllo sociale in America 1877–1920* (Genova: Herodote, 1983), 29–46.

56. Marx and Aveling, "Woman Question," 3.

57. *Ibid.*