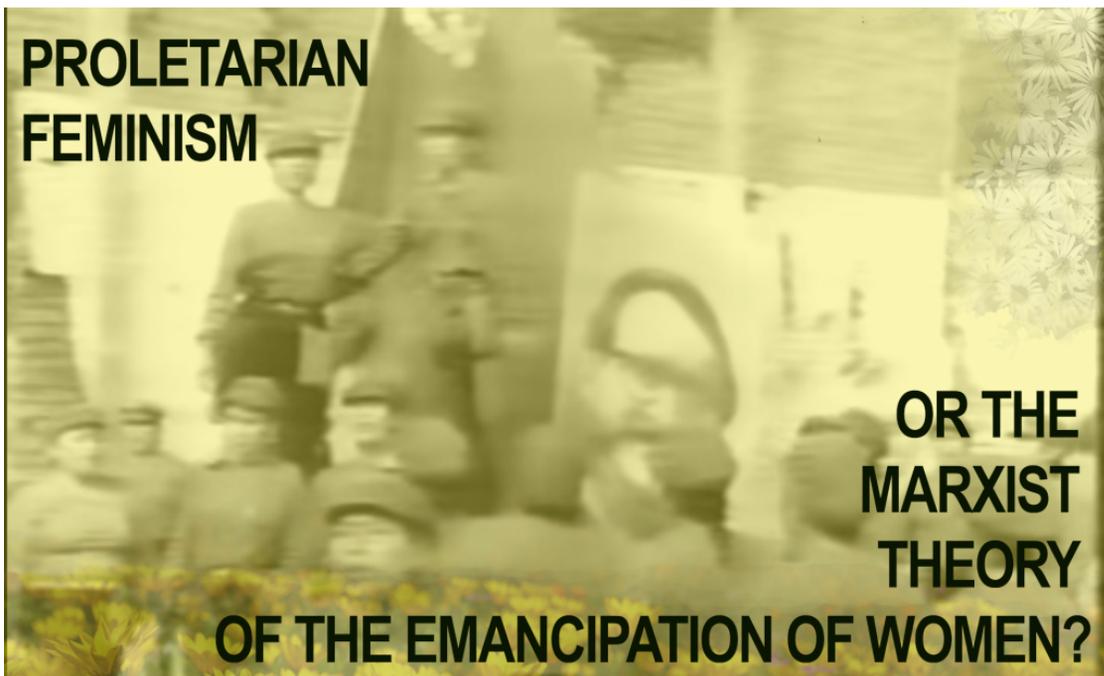


Proletarian Feminism or the Marxist Theory of the Emancipation of Women?

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STRUGGLESESSIONS



Struggle Sessions Editorial Board

This topic is of specific importance to revolutionaries in the US; our position is formulated on the basis of two-line struggles between the left and right in the US as well as an evaluation of the history of the International Communist Movement. We reject the terminology of “proletarian feminism” on the basis that it is faulty; it is also dangerous in terms of its side-effect of presenting “feminism” as scientific. The term “proletarian feminism” is used in many places by many different groups and we approach the matter objectively with the understanding that genuinely revolutionary comrades as well as opportunists and revisionists use the term. We speak only for Struggle Sessions; our views do not necessarily reflect those of anyone else.

Is “Proletarian Feminism” a product of the History of the International Communist Movement?

We have encountered well-articulated arguments in favor of “proletarian feminism” as well as gross revisionist ones, for instance those of the postmodernist and Right Opportunist Line once operating in the US. For our purposes we will focus on the term itself, its implications, and our objections to using it; we will not approach its poorly-defined content, which is varied at best. Further, we will not concern ourselves with those who actively use the term; our purpose is to express in our view why the term is no longer used by Maoists in the US. Struggle Sessions has in the past hosted articles which used the term; we do not wish to conceal this view, as this only highlights the existence of two lines within any organism.

Marxism has already provided the proletarian position on the women’s movement; this much is undeniable. This position has not been construed by the most advanced Marxist theorists, Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Chairman Mao or Chairman Gonzalo as “proletarian feminism.” At best we find assumption of the terminology “proletarian feminism,” an assumption that it is correct. We do not believe the term is necessary; if it were, this articulation would likely have been established by one of the great teachers of Marxism—or at the very least would be defined as a clear theoretical terrain.

Our first major disagreement with the term “proletarian feminism” is this: Marxism-Leninism-Maoism is the ideology of the international proletariat, all powerful because it is true; it requires no assistance from the school of thought called feminism, nor does it need ideological rapprochement with feminism, nor does it need to rehabilitate the title of feminism to accomplish its tasks regarding working women.

It is one thing to insist that Marxism answers the women’s question, but it is entirely another thing to claim that Marxism *is* feminist albeit with the disclaimer “proletarian” affixed to the front of it. Marxism is proletarian and in the service of the emancipation of women, but it is not feminist. The inclusion of “proletarian feminism” within Marxism allows confusion; feminism is confused with the scientific ideology of the proletariat. We believe demarcations are necessary.

We raise the issue: where and by whom was the Marxist position on the oppression and emancipation of women originally formulated as “proletarian feminism”? This term is not found in the works of Marx, Lenin, Mao, or the Communist Party of Peru. Whose contribution is it then? Where does the specific articulation of “proletarian feminism” come from? And where is the argument that this is the most appropriate summary of Marxism’s position on the women’s question? These questions must be answered, with historical materialism regarding both Marxism and feminism, before anyone should accept the new terminology. It is critical when implementing new terms to be able to situate them within the revolutionary struggles that produce them, and to understand the core theory expressing these as such.

It is up to the “proletarian feminists” then to prove their alternations are desirable and necessary; until then, these alterations should not be accepted as scientific or substantiated, nor should they be inscribed upon our banners. In our view, such an alteration politically seeks to reconcile with feminism—which is not a product of Marxist thinking.

It is easy enough to imagine the temptation to claim the mantle of feminism, but only if one conflates the term itself with the struggles of women; the oppression of women is an undeniable fact of class society, but we depart in our views at the assumption that feminism of any variety is the answer.

In our studies of Engels, the first to take up the women’s question from a proletarian and scientific viewpoint, we note that the content of his work, that is, the thought of Engels, is in fact at odds with feminism. Essentially we see that “proletarian feminism” is reconciling with feminism by adding terminology rooted in bourgeois revolution and utopian socialism. In this way it is to impose bourgeois trends onto established Marxist positions, with no example available of elevating the previously established view. We note that the term “feminism” was already in use for decades before Engels’s work—though not as common as today—and that Engels did not take this term up or attempt to claim it as Marxism.

Marxists should not make such concessions or rehabilitate feminism by claiming that it is, or even can be, proletarian. Marxism does not need to market itself as feminism in order to answer the women's question.

Regarding Feminism

In the important conversation between the great Lenin and Comrade Clara Zetkin, it is notable that neither of these two monumental revolutionaries sought to label their ideas with the inclusion of feminism, and hence never ventured to call themselves feminists (proletarian or otherwise), but Marxists (this was still the stage at the time of the development into Marxism-Leninism). Lenin himself demarcates:

“The thesis must clearly point out that real freedom for women is possible only through communism. The inseparable connection between the social and human position of the woman, and private property in the means of production, must be strongly brought out. That will draw a clear and ineradicable line of distinction between our policy and feminism.”

Maoists, just like Lenin, recognize that real freedom for women is possible only through communism, but things get confused when it comes to drawing the clear line of distinction with feminism. Lenin uses the word “ineradicable” and this is not a haphazard choice or accident; the word means here that the line of distinction between Marxists and feminists is *unable to be destroyed or removed*. In our view, rehabilitating feminism by calling Marxism “feminist,” even when this is coupled with “proletarian”, is a discredit to both and a blurring of the ineradicable line of distinction.

Our rejection of the title “proletarian feminism” in no way diminishes the opposition to the oppression of women, nor does it lessen the desire to fight for their emancipation. The Marxist argument was, and remains, that women

must be organized as a force for proletarian revolution and must be provided with specific women's organizations.

Lenin too acknowledged the need to organize women, and he expressed that this need is explicitly *not feminist*:

“I am thinking not only of proletarian women, whether they work in the factory or at home. The poor peasant women, the petty bourgeois – they, too, are the prey of capitalism, and more so than ever since the war. The unpolitical, unsocial, backward psychology of these women, their isolated sphere of activity, the entire manner of their life – these are facts. It would be absurd to overlook them, absolutely absurd. **We need appropriate bodies to carry on work amongst them**, special methods of agitation and forms of organisation. **That is not feminism, that is practical, revolutionary expediency.**” [Our emphasis]

We see no evidence of developments or conditions which would make anything Lenin is saying here incorrect today, or even in need of a name change. If anything, the role of women in production the world over—which is the precondition for their emancipation—has increased. If anything, more than ever what we must demand and what we need is not feminism (of any type) but practical revolutionary expediency.

Our readers and opponents would be correct to assert that Lenin is speaking of “bourgeois” feminism here. Indeed he was. This is because feminism is a bourgeois trend, in contradiction with Marxism and offering an unscientific approach to the question of women; furthermore, Marxism does not need to brand itself as feminist since it has independently provided its argument. The adjustment offered with “proletarian feminism” is in fact a concession and nothing more.

It must be stated that feminism is bourgeois, but it is rooted in the period where the bourgeoisie *was* a revolutionary class; feminism had within it a revolutionary quality which, like the bourgeoisie itself, reached certain

developments within the world which have by and large eliminated this quality. The Great October Socialist Revolution ended the period of progressive bourgeois revolution finally. The ideas of the bourgeoisie including their old revolutionary ideas do not live on, and what is correct and revolutionary is already contained within the new, proletarian ideas. We treat feminism with this same measure—as Marxists there is no other option.

We do not suggest demolishing feminism with a single blow, nor denouncing it outright, nor do we oppose feminists or those proclaiming “proletarian feminism” who are among the people and the revolutionary struggle. The long history of the feminist movement has produced a wealth of diverse and contradictory thought which must be examined, divided into two; whatever is true must be affirmed in the process of negating what is false.

Mariátegui and “proletarian feminism”

In debates on this topic we have encountered another issue, and one of some significance, which is the issue of drawing conclusions from Mariátegui’s works and from the document *Marxism, Mariátegui and the Women’s Movement*. We put special emphasis on the latter since it contains within it the former and retakes Mariátegui’s road on the question of women.

Feminism, as Mariátegui points out, did not appear “artificially or arbitrarily” but as “a result of the new forms of intellectual and manual labor of women.” Hence, even with its shortcomings it would be an error for revolutionaries not to recognize its historical progressive aspects, which in some cases are congruent with certain Marxist demands, even if feminism, (whether we call it proletarian or not) cannot complete the emancipation of women or guide this process. This understanding does not permit Marxism to reconcile with feminism as feminism and amend its terms to appease the latter; instead, it demands that feminism be divided, like all things, into two. This is mainly to

demarcate the good which aligns with the Marxist position on the emancipation of women from the bad which does not—or, in Mariátegui's words, from the “dilettante” views which make the question of women “a mere literary exercise.”

When documents like *Marxism, Mariátegui, and the Women's Movement* are translated into English, words like *femenino* and *feminismo* are often confused, and this confusion comes at a cost to understanding. For instance, the website Marxists.org hosts a considerably dubious English translation of *Marxism, Mariátegui and the Women's Movement* which makes this mistake. Their translation states:

“In the French Revolution we can already see clearly how the advance of women and their setbacks are linked to the advances and setbacks of the people and the revolution. This is an important lesson: **The identity of interests of the feminist movement and the people's struggle**, how the former is part of the latter.” [Emphasis ours]

However, in the original, we are confronted with a different subject:

“*En la revolución francesa ya se puede ver con claridad cómo el avance de las mujeres y su retroceso están ligados a los avances y los retrocesos del pueblo y la revolución. Esta es una lección importante: **La identidad de intereses del movimiento femenino y la lucha popular**, como aquél es parte de ésta.*” [Emphasis ours]

We note that *feminismo* is the word for “feminism” and *femenino* is a word for “women's” (which can also mean “feminine”). Hence a more correct translation would be, “**the identity of interests in the women's movement and the people's struggle**” without inserting here the word “feminist.” Feminism after all denotes an ideology—that is, if one recognizes the -ism—while the women's movement denotes the struggle of women broadly, including those who follow feminism and those who do not. This is not an inconsequential or pedantic distinction.

One of the major issues with misunderstandings of Peruvian documents resides in the poor translations into English, and it is not limited to this topic. We point out this issue to highlight how often the document *Marxism, Mariátegui and the Women's Movement* is misunderstood through poor translation, and how common are the bad or even opportunistic translations of Peruvian documents. More often than not, these unofficial translations are incorrect; Marxists.org cannot even attribute the text to the correct authors let alone translate it politically because they do not comprehend Maoism or the Communist Party of Peru. As anyone can guess, the PCP put great emphasis on the -ism and did not treat this matter casually. This is further exemplified with the formation of Movimiento Femenino Popular, which we stress was not called the “People’s Feminist Movement;” this must not be considered accidental, but intentional, clear, and precise.

At times, Mariátegui used the term “feminism” loosely and interchangeably with the women’s movement, which should be understood in the context of his time. He did not, however, argue for alterations which adopt the terminology “proletarian feminism,” nor did he put “proletarian feminism” forward *as doctrine or expression of Marxism-Leninism*. The Peruvian comrades did not attempt this either; in their monumental text (*Marxism, Mariátegui and the Women's Movement*) they use the phrase only when quoting Mariátegui and they do not inscribe “proletarian feminism” upon their banners. If such an alteration was necessary due to the work of Mariátegui then surely the Peruvian comrades would have seen to this task left by their founder.

Since so much confusion seems to be derived from a particular quote, the only instance where “proletarian feminism” is mentioned, we must examine it closer. Mariátegui stated in 1924:

“Feminism has, necessarily, several colors, different tendencies. One can distinguish in feminism three fundamental tendencies, three substantive colors: bourgeois feminism, petty-bourgeois feminism and proletarian feminism. Each of these feminisms formulates their demands in a different way. Bourgeois women sympathize their feminism with the interests of the

conservative class. The proletarian woman equalizes in essence [*consustancia*] her feminism with the faith of the revolutionary multitudes in the future society.”

We point out the meaning of the word “tendency”: an inclination toward, and its use here as an inclination toward something by sections of people within feminism itself; as such it is undeniable that there is a tendency within feminism, a tendency represented by feminists *who are* proletarians which allows them to equalize in essence their feminism with the revolutionary multitudes of a future society. What conclusion must be drawn from this profound statement? That Marxism has the obligation to rename its theories as “feminism” which has a historical revolutionary as well as a reactionary aspect, or, on the other hand, to understand more firmly the need to mobilize women (specifically working women) as a force for proletarian revolution on the basis that their demands as women are inextricably fused with their interests shared with the great revolutionary masses?

Feminism *as a pure idea* is essentially revolutionary, yet within it there are various metaphysical and even reactionary trends; the solution to this problem is not the rigging up, synthesizing, or fabricating of yet another trend of feminism, but to insist that Marxism contains within it the program for the final emancipation of women, made possible through their integration into production, realized in communist revolution. This process is better summed up in the slogan; mobilize women as a force for proletarian revolution, than the various slogans to the effect of; “proletarian feminism to smash patriarchy,” etc...

Conclusion

Proletarian feminism is not a terrain which has been properly theorized, demarcated, or defined. It need not be; there is no need to claim feminism for

ourselves, as Marxism, that is to say Marxism–Leninism–Maoism, has already within it the theory for the emancipation of women through new democratic, socialist, and cultural revolutions—in sum, *through communist revolution*. The task then is not to conceive of feminism as proletarian, but to seek clarity, to demarcate, to provide special organizations and special propaganda for laboring women of the oppressed and exploited classes.

Many tend to cite the emergence of this “-ism” that is “proletarian feminism” in the text *Philosophical Trends in the Feminist Movement* by the Indian Communist Anuradha Ghandy; however this text does not express itself in the synthesis of “proletarian feminism”; on the contrary, it stands as a critique of feminism through examining its different trends in polemical form. It is Marxist analysis, in defense of Marxism, and not an effort to raise a banner inscribed with “proletarian feminism.”

It remains unclear where this formula originated; it is unclear what it is. Its proponents do not historically situate this trend, nor do they delineate its character beyond stating that it is Maoism applied to the question. This is not sufficient to deem an “-ism” or a concrete sphere of activity. Marxism demands theoretical rigor, precision in definition. On this basis we reject the category of proletarian feminism as such.

While we do not wish to squabble over semantics, we must highlight that words are not inconsequential, especially revolutionary terms—revolutionary terminology is quite consequential, because it is scientific, precise. Hence we conclude that affixing “proletarian” to the front of “feminism” does nothing ultimately but play word games, a propaganda decision with a negative consequence.

In our view, revolutionaries who use the unscientific terminology and those who oppose its use still have a duty to *unite around the necessity of developing organizations of women in service of proletarian revolution*, which alone brings about the emancipation of women and can end the oppression of women, and we consider this position to be one of Lenin’s many great contributions. The

ideological basis of these formations must be Marxism–Leninism–Maoism, principally Maoism, and these must follow democratic centralism. We find the best examples of this in the great socialist revolutions, the people’s wars, and the emergence of the Movimiento Femenino Popular in Latin American and especially Peru. We appreciate the fact that everywhere Maoists are organized there is a women’s front under proletarian leadership or one in development, not only in the glorious people’s wars, but throughout Latin America, in the US, and throughout Europe where women rise as a force not only in the interest of women, but in the interests of the proletariat and proletarian revolution; this is an accomplishment of great international significance and a cause worthy of celebration on International Working Women’s Day.

In principle, we unite with all those who insist on raising the banner of the women’s struggle and participating in every way within the women’s movement, to link the movement in the mind of all working women with communism, our unalterable goal, and we issue this article to bring clarity to the matter by stating our position on terminology in regard to Marxism and the women’s question. While on the surface this can seem like we are lodging complaints based on doctrinaire formality, we are, rather, attempting to highlight the political implications attached to altering terminology. We publish this document in observance of International Working Women’s Day.

LONG LIVE INTERNATIONAL WORKING WOMEN’S DAY!

WOMEN HOLD UP HALF THE SKY!

THE EXPERIENCE OF ALL LIBERATION MOVEMENTS HAS SHOWN THAT THE SUCCESS OF A REVOLUTION DEPENDS ON HOW MUCH THE WOMEN TAKE PART IN IT!

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