

CAPX

The anti-egalitarian, sexist origins of socialism

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Happy International Women's Day! You may have heard that today is, as *The Guardian* once put it, "an important day in the socialist calendar," its history intertwined with that of the Soviet Union. Today, socialist feminism enjoys a surprising popularity in many universities' Women's Studies departments. Self-identifying socialist feminists hope to fight what they call a "capitalist culture of male supremacy."

However, the origins of socialism are not as progressive as many of its adherents believe, certainly not on the point of women's equality. In *The Lost Literature of Socialism*, Cambridge University historian George Watson points out that socialism was originally a *conservative* idea, and that many prominent socialists – seldom read even by their admirers – actually "hated progress and demanded a return to ancient values". That included a return to traditional gender roles.

Socialism was arguably a reactionary response to how the Industrial Revolution transformed society. Industrialisation created a class of *nouveau riche* who gained wealth through market transactions rather than by birthright, threatening the old order: "enfeebling traditional authority... and weakening hereditary influences." Factories also brought women into the labour force *en masse*, granting them economic independence and bargaining power that altered family dynamics and disturbed old-fashioned sensibilities.

In short, commoners and women were earning money, and traditionalists were aghast. The prominent Victorian social thinker John Ruskin wrote in his 1860 critique of capitalism, *Unto the Last*, that his aim was "to show the superiority of some men to others" and the wisdom of a hierarchical society that keeps "inferiors" in their place. Socialism presented an alternative to the unprecedented social mobility and rapid changes of the industrial age. Watson notes that many people felt the classical liberals advocating "free trade and the free market were rapidly destroying traditional patterns of life, loosening family ties and threatening morality itself". As the socialist Bertolt Brecht once said: "Communism is not radical. It is capitalism that is radical."

“It is easy to forget that conservative interests were once fiercely critical of competitive wealth-creation and the commercial spirit,” as Watson puts it. (Today, too, entrenched interests often stand to gain most from regressive regulation of the economy).

Socialism historically has resulted in the installation of hereditary systems of entrenched privilege, “since only privilege educates for the due exercise of centralised power in a planned economy.” Children of the bourgeoisie were relegated to a subordinate caste in the Soviet Union. Stalin’s eldest son, had he not died, would have been destined for high office. President Ceausescu of Romania gave his wife and son cabinet posts.

Today’s Marxist feminists might be shocked not only by socialist attitudes towards hereditary privilege, but also by original socialist attitudes towards gender roles. In the *Condition of the Working Class of England*, Friedrich Engels observed with horror that in some households, women factory workers acted as breadwinners and their husbands as homemakers. Such an arrangement, he lamented, was not only “insane” but also “unsexes the man and takes from the woman all womanliness”. Gender role reversal, Engels continued, “degrades, in the most shameful way, both sexes, and, through them, Humanity.”

In practice, wherever socialism has been enacted, women were expected both to work outside the home and to do all the housework as well. And in centrally planned economic systems without any market incentive to fulfil human needs, it is women’s needs that were forgotten first. Right up until the fall of communism in the Eastern Bloc countries, communist factories failed to manufacture even the most basic items for women, such as sanitary products. Those who romanticise socialism as liberating for women would do well to learn about the actual hardships women suffered, such as the stories of the women of the Gulag. Female Gulag inmates were almost always sentenced for the alleged crimes of their husbands or fathers, and in addition to the other terrors of the labour camps, also endured institutionalised sexual violence. Communist officials saw women as just another means of punishing men, rather than as individuals with distinct identities.

So on this International Women’s Day, when considering the holiday’s socialist past, also give some thought to the anti-egalitarian and sexist origins of socialism.

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