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German Maternalist Socialism: Clara Zetkin and the 1896 Social Democratic Party Congress

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The liberation struggle of the proletarian woman cannot be similar to the struggle that the bourgeois woman wages against the male of her class. On the contrary, it must be a joint struggle with the male of her class against the entire class of capitalists. She does not need to fight against the men of her class in order to tear down the barriers which have been raised against her participation in the free competition of the market place. Capitalism's need to exploit and the development of the modern mode of production totally relieves her of having to fight such a struggle. On the contrary, new barriers need to be erected against the exploitation of the proletarian woman. Her rights as wife and mother need to be restored and permanently secured. Her final aim is not the free competition with the man, but the achievement of the political rule of the proletariat. The proletarian woman fights hand in hand with the man of her class against capitalist society. To be sure, she also agrees with the demands of the bourgeois women's movement, but she regards the fulfillment of those demands simply as a means to enable that movement to enter the battle, equipped with the same weapons, alongside the proletariat (77–78).¹

At the 1896 Gotha congress of the Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD), Clara Zetkin (1857–1933) delivered a speech that boldly asserted: 'Only in Conjunction with the Proletarian Woman will Socialism be Victorious'. The head quote is drawn from that speech, a work that is seminal in the history of European socialism. The Gotha speech succinctly laid out the Marxist explanation of the impact of capitalism on female oppression, demonstrated how women's experience of subjugation was highly differentiated by social class, and set the agenda for female socialist activism. Zetkin provided a signal feminist moment

in calling for proletarian women to join in the class struggle. This passage occurs at the midpoint of the speech, after Zetkin had described the distinctive class-based effects of capitalism on women and before she reflected on specific ways proletarian class-consciousness might be inspired among working women. The passage effectively summarizes the core beliefs that would guide the nature of women's engagement both in the SPD and in the Second International.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Clara Zetkin was the most important woman in the most powerful socialist movement in the world, embodied in the SPD. From 1890 (the year that Germany's Anti-Socialist Law expired) through the onset of World War I, Zetkin's work in the SPD spanned the roles of organizer, activist, editor and ideologue. Zetkin's reach extended well beyond Germany; in 1889, she served on the organizing committee of the Second Socialist International and in 1907 became Secretary-General of its first women's section.² In 1917, after continuous and vociferous opposition to SPD support of the war, Zetkin left the party she had helped to create; she became a founding member of the German Communist Party (KPD) in 1918. She represented the party in the Reichstag throughout the duration of the Weimar Republic and, as the assembly's eldest member, opened the last session of the last freely elected Weimar legislature in 1932.³ During her final years, Zetkin spent a great deal of time in the Soviet Union and died there just months after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. Buried at the Kremlin Wall Necropolis, Zetkin became an iconic figure in twentieth-century European socialist societies, especially in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), where a street in central Berlin bore her name and the ten-mark note featured her likeness.

Today the GDR is gone, the currency eradicated, the street name changed. Because she was celebrated in the Eastern bloc and the most significant scholarly writing about her work (in both East and West) occurred in the decades of the Cold War, Zetkin's historical standing has diminished in the years since 1989. Even before the fall of the Berlin Wall, historian Richard Evans noted that Zetkin tended to be overshadowed in the annals of Communist history by Russian Alexandra Kollontai, whose 'theory of sexual freedom and emancipation ... [gave] such fascination for later decades,' and by fellow German Rosa Luxemburg, whose 'martyr's death ... lent a posthumous glow'.⁴ But Luxemburg's life work did not focus on women's liberation in the way that Zetkin's did, and Zetkin's views were formative to Kollontai's approach to feminist socialism.⁵ The evolution of European thought on the relationship between socialism and the women's movement cannot be understood without assessing the work, ideas and organizational acumen of Clara Zetkin.

Zetkin's key ideological legacy is simple: socialism trumps feminism. This tenet had been set forth in the early works on women and socialism by August Bebel and Friedrich Engels.⁶ But she moved beyond these towering figures not only in terms of her work as an organizer but also in terms of ideology. She sharpened the differentiation between feminist socialist activism and the bourgeois women's movement, a crusade towards which she thought Bebel extended too much sympathy.⁷ Zetkin placed more emphasis on the proletarian woman as fighting 'hand in hand with the man of her class', thus placing her world view closer to that of Engels, especially in her explanation for the evolution of women's subjugation and her focus on mass movements as the key to female liberation (78). In his 1884 work, *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels linked the subjugated status of women in the family to the evolution of inheritance law and the growth of patrilineal wealth.⁸ Zetkin's leadership role necessitated putting such ideas in action. In devoting her life to inspiring the socialist sensibilities of women and convincing her male compatriots of the importance of including women in the socialist movement, she naturally developed a much more extensive reading of feminist socialism than did Engels's more anthropological approach to women and the family.⁹ Zetkin expanded upon the groundwork provided by Bebel and Engels in articulating the foundational vision of women's socialist engagement.

The 1896 Gotha speech was groundbreaking in asserting that vision. My analysis of Zetkin's 1896 Gotha speech assesses the text in two ways. First, it investigates Zetkin's case for the divergent struggles of proletarian and bourgeois women, which emphasizes how the working woman had been 'relieved' of the fight against the men of her class. Second, it explores Zetkin's conception of the proletarian 'wife and mother'. These two elements join together in forming Zetkin's agenda for female socialist engagement. At their core is an orthodox Marxist understanding of capitalist exploitation instilled with a maternalist sensibility central to the women's activism of Zetkin's time.

Why should the proletarian woman not 'fight against the men of her class?' For Zetkin, Marx and Engels, the answer rested in the origins of the concept of female social illegality – the legal restriction of women's rights – which 'coincided with the creation of private property' (72). Inequality within the family emerged with the legal establishment of the role of a male proprietor who held rights of inheritance – and thus the 'wife as non-proprietor', barred from inheritance. Engels's *Origin of the Family* fixes this development in 'prehistoric times'¹⁰, but Zetkin's 1896 interpretation gives greater emphasis to the female experience in contemporary terms and does not delve into origins. Critical to her case was the

historical assertion that, prior to capitalism, women were not conscious of their inequality despite the limitations placed upon their opportunity and potential. Only 'the capitalist mode of production... created the societal transformation that brought forth the modern women's question by destroying the old family economic system which provided both livelihood and life's meaning for the great mass of women during the pre-capitalistic period' (72). The destructive forces of capitalism made social class central to female experience. Thus Zetkin focused her discussion on how the ravages of the industrial era differently affected bourgeois and proletarian women.

Among the bourgeoisie, the 'concomitant symptoms of capitalist production' hurtle them 'further and further towards their destruction'. Zetkin expanded on this Marxist maxim by elucidating the consequences for bourgeois matrimony. Marriage prospects dimmed: 'the number of marriages is decreasing; although on the one hand the material basis is worsening, on the other hand the individual's expectations of life are increasing, so that a man of that background will think twice or even thrice before he enters into a marriage... Thus within the bourgeois circles, the number of unmarried women increases all the time.' These women searched fruitlessly for meaningful occupation, 'pushed out into society so that they may establish for themselves their own livelihood which is not only supposed to provide them with bread but also with mental satisfaction'. The dearth of opportunities caused middle-class women to band together in search of social and economic change. The bourgeois women's movement emerged from the strivings of uprooted females who had been made conscious of their social illegality due to the destabilizing effects of capitalism. Bourgeois men feared this movement, because they were apprehensive about 'the battle of competition' that could potentially disrupt working life and were also immersed in the privileges of dominance and the freedom of life outside marriage (75-76).

In this narrative of displacement, movement and resistance, Zetkin made the case for separating the 'liberation struggle of the proletarian woman' from that of her bourgeois compatriots. The marriage crisis she described did not plague the proletariat, as working men in the industrial era were not hesitant to marry, and working women did not suffer from lack of occupation.¹¹ Indeed, an overabundance of work most afflicted Zetkin's target audience: 'As far as the proletarian woman is concerned, it is capitalism's need to exploit and to search incessantly for a cheap labor force that has created the women's question' (76). Thus there would be no battle between proletarian men and women analogous to the bourgeois conflict, as no barriers had been 'raised against her participation

in the free competition of the market place'. Proletarian women worked in order to support the family, while bourgeois women needed to work because family had eluded them. Their struggles differed in essence, and no women's movement could bring them together.

But Zetkin's speech made clear that the proletarian woman did struggle. The working woman 'wanted to bring prosperity to her family, but instead misery descended upon it'. Such misery resulted from the distance that grew between mother and family as she entered the labour force. Exploitative employers benefited from the cheaper labour of females as 'the machine rendered muscular force superfluous ... [thus] the capitalists multiply the possibilities of women's work' (77).

Capitalism had made the proletarian woman conscious of her social illegality through her exploited status as a labourer. Zetkin's language conveyed the particular conditions of female oppression: thwarted in her attempt for prosperity, separated from family, used as cheap labour and, above all, submissive to her exploitation. Only 'hand in hand with the man of her class' could she seek change. And, as the title of the speech (and subsequent pamphlet) indicates, 'only in conjunction with the proletarian woman will socialism be victorious'. This was true not only in the idealistic terms of a movement that sought to liberate humanity from exploitation, but also in practical terms: cheap and submissive female labour was an essential means of capitalist predominance. Zetkin's agenda was clear: 'The main task is, indeed, to awaken the women's class consciousness and to incorporate them into the class struggle.' Class struggle trumped the feminist struggle: 'the petty, momentary interests of the female world must not be allowed to take up the stage. Our task must be to incorporate the modern proletarian woman in our class battle!' (79).

In both her description of the exploitation of the female proletariat and her rejection of the bourgeois women's movement, Zetkin draws upon the pulls of home – evoking dreams of a 'sunny and pleasant life for her children', and seeking justice through the 'rights as wife and mother [being] restored and permanently secured'. The Gotha speech reflected the maternalist ideology of its time. As described by historian Ann Taylor Allen, maternalism celebrated the importance of 'the world as a mother-centered household, centered on an egalitarian male-female couple and pervaded by maternal values of nurture, compassion, and individualized concern'.¹² Allen's work has been pivotal in demonstrating that maternalist thought was germane to both moderate bourgeois feminism and the radical activism of reformers such as Lily Braun, Ruth Bré and Helene Stöcker. Maternalist ideology suffused Zetkin's radicalism as well.

While she was a thoroughly committed socialist, she came from bourgeois stock. Trained as a schoolteacher and governess in the 1870s at a seminar headed by early moderate women's rights advocate, Auguste Schmidt, Zetkin came of age in an environment that emphasized maternal service as the foremost way in which women could contribute to society and perhaps transform it.¹³ Zetkin championed the maternal role in the Gotha speech:

It must certainly not be the task of Socialist propaganda among Socialist women to alienate the proletarian woman from her duties as mother and wife. On the contrary, she must be encouraged to carry out these tasks better than ever in the interests of the liberation of the proletariat. The better the conditions within her family, the better her effectiveness at home, the more she will be capable of fighting. The more she can serve as the educator and molder of her children, the better she will be able to enlighten them so that they may continue to fight on... When a proletarian exclaims: 'My wife!' he will add mentally, 'Comrade of my ideals, companion of my battles, mother of my children for future battles' (81–82).

Zetkin's words evoke a harmonious familial scene, characterized by enlightened children, a companionate marriage and a purposeful wife and mother at the bedrock. These happy households would promote socialist activism and perhaps even offer a conduit to socialism's triumph.

Engels's *Origin of the Family* served as a forerunner to Zetkin's idealization of the proletarian marriage. In it, Engels contended that, 'since large-scale industry has moved the woman from the house to the labor market and the factory, and made her, often enough, the bread-winner of the family, the last remnants of male domination in the proletarian home have lost all foundation – except, perhaps, for a bit of that brutality towards women which became firmly rooted with the establishment of monogamy.'¹⁴ The bit of conjectured brutality aside, Engels presented a vision of equality in the proletarian household. Yet, as Lise Vogel has observed, his vision 'vastly underestimates the variety of ideological and psychological factors that provide a continuing foundation for male supremacy in the working-class family'.¹⁵ Engels's presentation of women's work prior to industrialization is also somewhat idealized. Sociologist Josette Trat notes, 'Going out to work was not completely new for women ... Nostalgic images of an ideal woman at her household's service had little in common with reality'.¹⁶

Zetkin, too, has been criticized for romanticizing the condition of the proletariat in her appeals for a unified socialist movement. Another sociologist, Tania Ünlüdağ, has argued that Zetkin 'based the content and aims of her

feminist activities on a theoretical construct, particularly on a construct of the proletarian woman that had little in common with the social and economic situation of the actually existing proletarian woman in Imperial Germany.¹⁷ Vogel is similarly critical, maintaining that in the 1896 Gotha speech, 'Zetkin's picture of the working-class woman constitutes an abstraction that verges on caricature.'¹⁸ Certainly, in her description of comrades-in-marriage facing life's battles together, Zetkin evokes an archetype rather than a real relationship. But, the 1896 text was a speech, intended to garner a reaction and enlist support for a specific agenda of female activism. In an 1899 pamphlet titled *Der Student und das Weib* [The Student and the Woman], Zetkin argues for the expansion of female education, especially at the highest levels. Most of the pamphlet focuses on the nature of education in Germany and explores the ways in which female study might best be structured. But, the text also describes the value of education in developing women into fully rounded human beings. An educated woman 'surely would be able to give with more complete, more mature strength the best of her being and endeavors, the being and endeavors of a beloved spouse, raising healthy children and excelling in oneself'. Such a mother would raise her children well, inspiring them to the heights of 'powerfully unfurled humanity'.¹⁹ The new epoch had created new demands but also new possibilities: 'The modern person seeks in love, marriage, and family life, a higher, more versatile, and richer substance than did his ancestors. If a woman wants to meet the higher responsibilities of wife and mother, she must not only be a strong and harmoniously developed personality, but also have the possibility to prosper in the family.'²⁰ The pamphlet closes with an image of enriched partnerships, similar to the relationship described in the Gotha speech: 'When two strong, free personalities find themselves in love marriage will ... elevate the individual personalities in mutual giving and receiving beyond themselves... The social revolution creates the social preconditions for full female humanity... and places by the side of the citizen a collaborative, coequal partner.'²¹ The 1899 text expands upon the maternalist ideals set forth in the Gotha speech, demonstrating their resilience in Zetkin's thought.

Both Marxism and maternalism drive towards a different and better future. Zetkin's activism prioritized socialism; thus the Gotha speech set forth the Marxist doctrine that female liberation could only be achieved by means of eradicating capitalism. This is affirmed in the penultimate paragraph of the 1896 speech that asserts, 'the incorporation of the great masses of proletarian women in the liberation struggle of the proletariat is one of the prerequisites for the victory of the socialist idea and for the construction of a socialist

society' (83). Yet Zetkin believed that such a society was also one in which distinctly maternal qualities would thrive. As her final paragraph concludes, 'only a socialist society will solve the conflict that is nowadays produced by the professional activity of women ... [then] the woman will become an equally entitled, equally creative ... companion of her husband; her individuality will flourish while at the same time, she will fulfill her task as wife and mother to the highest degree possible' (83). According to Clara Zetkin, socialism would only be victorious in conjunction with the proletarian woman – and that woman could only achieve her maternalist calling in a socialist society.