
Navigating Lemonade Seas: Frederick Engels, Utopian Socialism and Strategies for Emancipation

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Abstract

There is currently a resurgence of interest in utopian futures based on the potential of new technologies. Utopian imaginings were also central to the socialism which emerged in Europe in the 1820s and 1830s. In the 1840s, they found their way into the writings of Marx and Engels. Utopian socialism expressed the aspirations of thousands of working-class radicals and helped to generate a popular base for the approach developed by Engels and Marx. The influence of utopian thinking on Marxism has been dismissed by historians who characterise utopianism as a naïve ‘curtain raiser’ to Marxism. This article will challenge both the idea that utopian socialism was simply a staging post on the path to Marxism, and the characterisation of utopian socialism as a more inclusive, feminist-orientated alternative to Marxism. Engels’ experiences in Manchester and his early writings will demonstrate how early socialism and emerging Marxism interacted and stimulated each other.

Key words: Socialism, utopianism, feminism, Friedrich Engels, liberation

Introduction: ‘Utopia is possible – Yes, Even Now, Especially Now – But We Have to Demand It’¹

A quick look through the new titles offered by left-wing publishers gives a sense of the scale of the resurgence of interest in utopian futures, prompted by the deep, interlocking crises evident in the capitalist system. Scholars and activists are imagining different futures in order to critique climate catastrophe,² and the repressive, unhealthy nature of work.³ Advocating the abolition of deeply rooted institutions such as the family⁴ and the penal system⁵ depends on imagining wider social transformations which foreground collective solutions based on equali-

ty and solidarity. Utopian thinking can create cracks in capitalist realism, can contribute to confidence in other possibilities and counter the dystopian ideas generated by our ruling class. 'Another World Is Possible', Arundhati Roy wrote, 'On a quiet day I can hear her breathing'.⁶ Radical anti-capitalist movements need to envisage different futures rooting themselves in the soil of capitalist decay.

Utopian imaginings have played an important role in the socialist tradition since its emergence in the early nineteenth century. Differently imagined futures were foundational for the socialism which emerged in the 1820s and 1830s. In the next decade, they found their way into the writings of Marx and Engels and those who stood in their tradition. William Morris's *News from Nowhere* provided working-class militants with a sense of what a genuine proletarian democracy might look like. However, the contribution of utopian thinking to Marxism has been marginalised by historians of socialism who portray it as a hopelessly naïve 'curtain raiser' to Marxism.⁷ Idealistic utopian socialism, they argue, was inevitably replaced by materialist scientific socialism as socialism progressed in a linear path towards a predetermined final point of Marxism.⁸ Utopian socialism, thus, played an important role in exposing the deleterious impact of competition on human nature but it was quickly rendered obsolete by the irresistible rise scientific socialism. Frederick Engels and Karl Marx themselves established the parameters of this approach with their criticisms of the utopian socialist triumvirate of Robert Owen, Charles Fourier and Henri Saint-Simon.⁹ Influential female utopian socialists such as Flora Tristan and Frances Wright were marginalised from accounts of utopian socialism by both their contemporaries and by subsequent historians of early socialism. Their considerable contribution to early socialism will be excavated in this article.

Some historians have interpreted the transition from utopian socialism to Marxism as a closing down of radical possibilities. E. P. Thompson wrote with regret of the marginalisation of the imaginative utopian faculties within the later Marxist tradition, when the 'earthly paradise' became subordinated to the 'maximisation of economic growth'.¹⁰ Feminist historians have articulated a related concern that by the 1880s, a dogmatic insistence on primacy of class-based issues had replaced earlier calls for a multi-faceted offensive against all forms of social hierarchy.¹¹ Utopian socialism represented a moment of possibility which was superseded by a more narrowly focused Marxism based on the power of the white, male, skilled working class.

This article will contest both a teleological approach which reduces utopian socialism to a staging post on the path to Marxism, and the characterisation of utopian socialism as a more inclusive, more feminist-orientated alternative to Marxism. The relationship between utopian socialism and Marxism was much

more reciprocal than such accounts suggest. Utopian socialism expressed the aspirations of thousands of working-class radicals and helped to generate a popular base for the theoretical approach developed by Engels and Marx in the 1840s. Utopian socialism contained many diverse currents. Some advanced an idea of human emancipation which depended on the power of benevolent reason and practical cooperation capable of overwhelming ignorant self-interest and economic competition.¹² Others, however, advocated the creation of independent working-class organisation capable of demanding far-reaching reforms. As Marxism emerged, it brought into sharper focus the collective power of the working class as a force capable of transforming itself as it transformed society. Engels and Marx both envisaged a communist society as one free of private property, class division and inequality.

Utopian socialism was not an inclusive alternative to a narrow and exclusive Marxism. Their philosophies and strategies eventually diverged, but not before both utopian socialists and Marxists insisted upon the possibility of collective ownership, abundance, and human liberation and immersed themselves in strategies based on living different lives as well as organising for reform. Without utopian socialism there would have been no Marxism as we know it, and, despite their sometimes sharp criticisms of utopian schemes, Marx and Engels never forgot their debt.

Engels influenced and was influenced by socialists as he forged a new left within a milieu permeated by utopian ideas and organisations. Foregrounding Engels' experiences in Manchester and his writings from these years will reveal how early socialism and emerging Marxism interacted and stimulated each other. This article will situate Engels in the context of his utopian socialist antecedents and explore the originality of his developing critique of utopianism. It will then suggest ways in which Engels' critiques of utopian socialism can be used to navigate a socialist response to today's utopian movements.

Strategies for Constructing Popular Socialism

Utopian schemes for social change can appear naïve and fanciful. Charles Fourier did indeed predict that when society was transformed the seas would turn to lemonade and the planets would align.¹³ Engels observed how the utopians believed that their own ideas could circumvent historical processes and stimulate radical change:

Historical action is to yield to their personal inventive action, historically created conditions of emancipation to fantastic ones, and the gradual, sponta-

neous organisation of the masses to an organisation of society specifically contrived by these inventors.¹⁴

However, despite utopian socialists' quasi-religious language, their frustratingly vague formulations and their confidence in the power of their example, Engels was fully alive to the power of their trenchant criticisms of capitalism as a total system, their courageous attempts to create alternative ways of living and their advocacy of international solidarity.

The idea that rational argument and the example set by enlightened communities would be sufficient to uproot powerful vested interests can appear hopelessly naïve. However, in the 1820s and 1830s, capitalism was still emerging. It was a crisis-prone, immiserating system whose domination of the globe was in no way a foregone conclusion. As E. P. Thompson noted, 'The 1830s were years when many English people felt that the structure of industrial capitalism had only been partly built and the roof not yet set upon the structure'.¹⁵ Owenites suggested that this structure could be finished in a way which could remedy the life-denying and chaotic system.

The followers of Fourier, Saint-Simon and Owen demanded that private property and the extraction of surplus value from workers should be replaced by collective ownership and so eradicate crises. They insisted that human nature was not irrevocably shaped by original sin but could, in a communal society, replace competition, antagonism and hostility with solidarity, friendship and love.¹⁶ They believed that women should be liberated from the family which was the root of gender inequality, and that all the peoples of the world were brothers and sisters. The most influential utopians were also practical campaigners who demanded legal protections and better conditions for workers. Engels observed admiringly, 'Every social movement, every real advance in England on behalf of the workers links itself on to the name of Robert Owen'.¹⁷ The utopian socialist plans attracted a mass audience.¹⁸ As Eve Taylor notes, the British Owenites were so successful that prior to 1850 the term 'socialist' referred exclusively to them.¹⁹ In 1839 the French utopian socialist Flora Tristan asserted out of a population of 16 million, at least half a million British citizens were socialists.²⁰

Some utopian socialists stood aloof from campaigns for reforms, arguing that only the abolition of private property could ameliorate the harms caused by capitalism. Others engaged enthusiastically with popular movements and mobilisations. These socialists organised for trade union rights, for universal suffrage, and for sexual freedom.²¹ Such ambitions were dismissed as utopian dreams by contemporaries, but they were won by those prepared to fight for the impossible.

Followers of Robert Owen raised funds to establish their communes and set up cooperative societies which aimed to undermine the inequalities of the free market. In 1828 there were four of these societies. Just two years later there were 300 and as many as 500 were in operation by 1832.²² The early socialists also waged energetic mass propaganda campaigns. Between 1820 and 1840 some fifty newspapers were disseminating socialist ideas in Britain.²³ During the Birmingham Cooperative Congress of 1842 half a million leaflets were distributed, and cooperative missionaries gave away 1000 pamphlets in Manchester every Sunday.²⁴ The Owenites tried several different strategies for winning mass support, including their communes, the cooperative movement and the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union which aimed to organise men and women across different trades and expanded rapidly in 1833 before collapsing as quickly in 1834.²⁵

In France, Flora Tristan created a similar model of independent working-class organisation, the Workers' Union, which she envisaged as both international and inclusive to women.²⁶ Tristan's vision incorporated elements of utopianism with a more materialist approach which bridged the space between utopian socialism and Marxism.²⁷ Tristan published a newspaper, *L'Union Ouvrière* [The Workers' Union], which Engels compared to the mass circulation Chartist paper, *The Northern Star*, writing, 'I know a few small Paris workers' papers such as the *Union* which can compare with it [*The Northern Star*].'²⁸ There is speculation among her biographers that Karl Marx may have heard Tristan lecture in Paris in the early 1843, when his friend Arnold Ruge visited her salon.²⁹ Engels defended Tristan from the political attacks directed at her by the new Hegelians, Bruno Bauer and his circle. *The Holy Family*, Engels' first collaboration with Marx, was published in 1844. In the book, Engels mocked Bauer for accusing Tristan of 'feminine dogmatism' when it was their abstract 'criticism' which was condemned to dogmatism, even to '*feminine dogmatism*' (emphasis in original). Whether Tristan needed their support is another question. Her pamphlet, *The Workers' Union*, was already in its third edition when *The Holy Family* was being written and her union attracted considerable support.

Many utopians engaged in multiple strategies. Frances Wright established an Owenite commune at Nashoba, Tennessee, in 1825, modelled on Owen's New Harmony community. She edited a radical newspaper, *The Free Inquirer*, alongside Owen's son, Robert Dale Owen, and encouraged the creation of a working-class political party, whose supporters were known as the Fanny Wrighters, in New York in 1829.³⁰ In the 1840s, she corresponded with *The Northern Star* which advertised her publications and her lectures.

Many French utopians embraced the possibilities of revolutionary activity. During the revolutions of 1848 followers of Fourier and Saint-Simon demanded

both the right to work and political rights for women, and in the 1860s, many utopian socialists joined the First International. Jeanne Deroin, a follower of Fourier and Saint-Simon, stood for election to the national assembly following the revolution in Paris in 1848, the first woman to attempt to claim such a right. She was imprisoned in 1850 and then fled to exile in Britain, where she joined the First International and then the Socialist League when she became a friend of William Morris.³¹ Désirée Gay was a prominent utopian socialist who had met Robert Owen in London, participated in the national workshop movement in 1848 and went on to become secretary to the women's division of the First International.³² Some of these veteran socialists took an active part in the Paris Commune (1871). Victor Considerant replaced Fourier as leader of the movement when Fourier died. Considerant became a member of the First International and was active in the Paris Commune. Charles Pellarin, a biographer of Fourier, supported the revolution of 1848 and participated in the Paris Commune.

Utopian socialism and Marxism coexisted, competed, and cooperated in movements for reform and for international solidarity. Engels drank, argued and organised with utopian socialists and he participated in the radical political culture they pioneered and in practical campaigns for reform they supported. He sharpened his analysis by a series of critical engagements with the socialists active in the heart of the industrial revolution, the polluted, chaotic and teeming city of Manchester.

Engels and the Mancunian Utopia

Engels had first arrived in Manchester in December 1842. He was just 22 years old but had already established a reputation as a radical journalist.³³ His articles for radical liberal German newspapers reported on the growing demand for universal male suffrage which would, Engels reported optimistically, 'inevitably result in a revolution'.³⁴ One of the first places Engels visited was Manchester's newly-opened Owenite Hall of Science, which had been financed by selling £1 shares to local supporters.³⁵ In 1840, the Manchester Owenites had between 8,000 and 10,000 members. Engels was among some 3,000 people who crowded in Manchester's Communist Hall every Sunday to hear speeches which adopted the 'special viewpoint of the people' and used 'superabundant humour'. They also listened to a choir singing 'social hymns', visited the bookstall, took refreshments and attended dances and concerts where, Engels observed, 'people have a jolly time'. Engels recorded that every socialist institution, and most trade

unions and Chartist groups ran schools where ‘a purely proletarian education’ was given ‘free from the influence of the bourgeoisie’.³⁶

The mass base of support for Owenite socialism in the heartlands of the emerging working class impressed Engels. In 1843, he wrote that the English socialists were ‘far more principled and practical than the French’, their principles having been encouraged by cheap publications of Rousseau, Shelley, Paine, and by Owenite lectures. The socialists, ‘though only a small fraction’ of the total British working class, ‘were its most educated and solid elements’.³⁷ In 1847 Engels wrote:

I spent two years in the heart of Lancashire itself, and these two years were spent among the workers; I saw them both at their public meetings and in their small committees, I knew their leaders and their speakers, and I think I can assure you that in no other country in the world will you find men more sincerely devoted to democratic principles or more firmly resolved to cast off the yoke of the capitalist exploiters, under which they find themselves suffering at present, than these Lancashire cotton factory workers.³⁸

Engels’ contact with the lives of the Manchester’s industrial working classes encouraged his move away from Young Hegelian ideas of consciousness and freedom and towards the tangible world of political economy. Owenism was extraordinarily influential in forming the economic views of significant sections of the organised working class. Engels was delighted to find in Manchester a conception of political economy far more highly developed than that on the continent and he began to refashion it for his own purposes.³⁹ Engels wrote his ‘Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy’ in 1843 when he was deeply immersed in Manchester’s Owenite circles. Owenite political economy was amplified and modified by several talented socialist political economists who helped Engels to ‘de-Hegel’ himself.⁴⁰ Engels described Manchester Owenite John Watts an ‘outstanding man’.⁴¹ In his influential *The Facts and Fictions of Political Economists*, Watts argued that labour was the source of all wealth and that the division of labour, money and wages were the causes of economic crises. Engels saw at first hand the devastating effect fluctuations in the market could have on thousands of working men and women.

There is some suggestion that he met his life partner, Mary Burns and her sister Lizzie at the Owenite Hall of Science.⁴² The Burns sisters, who were Irish nationalists and working-class radicals, almost certainly acted as Engels’ guide as he explored the working-class and Irish communities of Manchester, experiences which provided vital material for his first book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), which he stressed was written from direct experience.

Engels' access to these experiences was derived from his relationship with the Burns sisters and Manchester's socialist networks.

In Manchester's Owenite circles Engels would have become accustomed to the presence of socialist women and mixed with the female factory workers and domestic servants who associated with the Manchester Owenites. Women contributed to the Owenite press and became female socialist lecturers. Prominent Owenite Emma Martin, for example, lectured in Manchester in 1841, the year before Engels arrived.⁴³ Through personal contacts and theoretical engagement with Manchester's socialists, the 'thin crust' of communist ideas Engels brought with him from Germany were enormously enriched.⁴⁴

By the end of the 1830s Owenism was losing support to the growing Chartist movement, which began to hold a series of monster rallies involving tens of thousands of working-class people. Millions signed the three national Chartist petitions of 1839, 1842 and 1848 and many rioted, went on strike and planned insurrections when those petitions were airily dismissed by parliament.⁴⁵ Engels embraced Chartism enthusiastically as a movement which both encapsulated and strengthened independent working-class consciousness. He visited the offices of *The Northern Star* in Leeds in and became a close friend of the Chartist leader Julian George Harney. Engels incorporated insights from Chartist publications into his own writings. In *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Engels famously used the phrase 'social murder', a phrase he borrowed from the pages of *The Northern Star*.⁴⁶ In 1845, Engels observed that nearly all leaders of the Chartist Movement were socialists or communists.⁴⁷ Certainly Engels' friend John Barmby and his wife Kate were advocates of communism, Owenism and Chartism.⁴⁸ Socialism, communism, Owenism and Chartism created a heady mix of popular ideas and mass actions and exerted an irresistible pull on the young Engels.

Engels: From Commune to Communism

Engels' experience of radical Manchester propelled him towards a distinctly utopian socialist phase. His stance can be identified in a series of newspaper articles he wrote for the Owenite *New Moral World*, the Chartist *Northern Star* and radical German publications edited by Karl Marx. Engels advocated a strategy based on the demonstrable success of existing commune experiments which would convince ever increasing members of all classes that the replacement of private property with communal living would bring everyone greater happiness. In an article written in October 1843, Engels observed that large numbers of radicals in England, France and Germany had all independently, 'come to the conclusion

that a thorough revolution of social arrangements based on community of property has now become an urgent and unavoidable necessity'.⁴⁹ The English, he wryly noted, came to the question practically in response to the immiseration of the workers. The French arrived at the question politically by asking for liberty and equality while the Germans took a more philosophical route by reasoning upon first principles.⁵⁰ These international socialists may have distinct starting points, but they all ended up with the same realisation that socialism was an unavoidable necessity.

Engels travelled to Paris in August 1844 where he had his second meeting with Marx. Jenny Marx and her husband had themselves dabbled in a spot of communal living. Jenny and Karl accepted an invitation from Arnold Ruge and his wife and George and Emma Hegwerth to join them in a communal household. Ruge proposed that the three women could share the domestic duties. The household lasted only a fortnight before the Marx family moved out.⁵¹ Drinks at the Café de la Regence turned into a ten-day binge of drinking and discussing during which Marx and Engels began an incredible political collaboration which lasted for the rest of the lives and transformed their fluid socialist ideas into the distinct idea of Marxism, but disengaging from the pull of utopian socialism was a process, not an event.

In a lengthy article written in October 1844, Engels argued that the existence of flourishing utopian communes provided socialists with ammunition to counter those 'People who agree and declare communism is a very fine thing' but argue it is impossible in practice.⁵² Engels rather speculatively argued that, 'all communist colonies have become so enormously rich after ten or fifteen years that they have everything they can desire in greater abundance than they can consume, so that no grounds for dispute exist'.⁵³ He reported on Owen's community, Harmony, which demonstrated how mechanisation could eradicate menial domestic labour: 'On the ground floor there was a large dining-hall and the kitchen, from which the full dishes were taken by a machine to the dining hall and the empty ones back to the kitchen'.⁵⁴ A small number of women acted as housekeepers for all, saving on time and expense. Engels did not elaborate on why such tasks should be performed exclusively by women. But he did write approvingly of the progressive education provided in the commune, observing how, 'The children are not tormented with religious and theological controversies, nor with Greek and Latin: instead, they become better acquainted with nature, their own bodies and their intellectual capacities'. Classes were held in the open air, time spent sitting still was kept to minimum and all children were taught, 'The practice of complete equality and brotherly love'.⁵⁵

Engels optimistically insisted that all the communal experiments then in place were entirely successful. Living communally meant that people lived better,

had more leisure for the development of their minds, and were 'more moral people than their neighbours who have retained private property'.⁵⁶ Engels believed that communes could completely insulate their members from the vagaries of the market and overcome class differentials. For working people communal living 'offers the prospect of an independent, secure existence without anxiety, of complete equality of rights with those who can now through their wealth turn the worker into their slave'.⁵⁷ The well off would also benefit from the general well-being offered by the communes. 'It is self-evident that the better and more intelligent among the rich will declare themselves in agreement with the working and support them', Engels wrote.⁵⁸ Such sentiments were indistinguishable from the cross-class strategies favoured by the utopian socialists who conceived their communes as the shoots of a perfect society growing in the soil of corruption and competition.

Engels joined Marx in Belgium in April 1845 where they spent hours discussing and critiquing utopian socialist schemes.⁵⁹ They developed a 'Critique of Critical Criticism', which rejected idealism and outlined a new materialist outlook: 'History does nothing, has no enormous wealth, wages no battles. It is live human beings who have possessions, perform actions and fight battles'.⁶⁰ A month later, Engels was still arguing for communes as a strategy for socialist transformation. In the *New Moral World*, he described speaking at a communist meeting in Elberfeld, Prussia, where he, 'spoke at some length on the practicability and the advantages of the Community system. He also gave some particulars of the American colonies and your [Owen's] own establishment at Harmony in proof of his assertions'.⁶¹

Engels' support for utopian communities came under pressure when he rejected Hegelian idealism and turned towards materialism. He was still defending Fourier, but in a humorous tone which referenced Fourier's fanciful predictions: 'I shall prefer to believe in the cheerful Fourier and all these stories rather than in the realm of the absolute spirit, where there is no lemonade at all, in the identity of Being and Nothing and the conjunction of the eternal categories. French nonsense is at least cheerful, whereas German nonsense is gloomy and profound'.⁶²

This growing independence from utopian strategies was reflected in Engels' practical activities. In August 1846, Engels travelled to Paris with a mission to win a layer of radical activists to the League of the Just, which soon became the Communist League. Its motto changed from 'All Men Are Brothers' to the more Tristanist and Marxist 'Workers of the World Unite'. Engels wrote a draft, 'A Communist Confession of Faith', which he redrafted in October 1847 into the 'Principles of Communism'. By November, Marx and Engels had won the League over and Marx worked on Engels' manuscript to write *The Communist*

Manifesto, published in February 1848. Engels' developing critique of utopianism was a crucial element of his growing commitment to historical materialism, but it did not unfold smoothly towards a predetermined end. Rather, these were years of debate and argument, of solidarity and critique.

The 1840s were a decade in which thousands of working-class people identified with an array of anti-capitalist and socialist ideas and attempted to put them into action. There was no clear distinction between utopian and scientific socialism. Followers of Owen, Fourier, Saint-Simon and of other utopian socialists such as Frances Wright and Étienne 'Père' Cabet organised alongside anti-Poor Law campaigners, Irish nationalists, Chartists and revolutionaries of all persuasions.⁶³ From a milieu shaped by intense, fierce debate and negotiation, and courageous political action, Marx and Engels made a creative leap into creating their own innovative and daring vision of working-class self-emancipation and revolutionary transformation.

The Long Shadow of Utopianism

Engels established a nuanced political approach to utopianism which he reaffirmed in his influential book, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880). His trenchant defence of the utopian socialists of the 1840s enabled him to contrast their grand visions with the altogether punier efforts of the utopians creating new schemes forty years later:

We can leave it to the literary small fry to solemnly quibble over these phantasies, which today only make us smile, and to crow over the superiority of their own bald reasoning, as compared with such 'insanity'. For ourselves, we delight in the stupendously grand thoughts and germs of thought that everywhere break out through their phantastic covering, and to which these Philistines are blind.

Engels applied his historical materialist approach to the development of the utopian socialist triumvirate who, he suggested, were caught in a contradiction. They recognised the class antagonisms that fuelled the French Revolution and generated anti-capitalist sentiments from British workers, but they could not transcend the limitations imposed on their project by the lack of development of the working class which was in its infancy and so appeared to offer little sense of independent political activity.⁶⁴ Engels praised the class-based historical analysis developed by Saint-Simon and Fourier despite these historical limitations. He also praised Owen for turning his back on wealth, applause, honour, and glory,

to attack private property, religion and marriage knowing he would face outlawry, excommunication from official society, and the loss of his whole social position.⁶⁵ The utopian socialists allied themselves with the working class, while simultaneously considering themselves to be above class antagonisms. In practice, they deadened the class struggle because to realise their castles in the air, the utopian socialists were compelled to appeal to the feelings and purses of the bourgeois.

Owenites tended to counterpose strikes to the abolition of private property which they believed would propel humanity towards a perfectible human nature. They dismissed strikes as counterproductive and unnecessarily conflictual. In contrast, Engels and Marx supported strikes which they saw as a crucial step towards self-emancipation. It was experience of the class struggle which, Engels argued, enabled workers not only to contest the terms of their exploitation but also to break from passivity and demoralisation and to envisage different futures.

Women's Liberation and Family Abolition

Support for women's liberation permeated utopian socialism. Many advocated the abolition of marriage, collective provision for social reproduction and birth control with the aim of establishing sexual freedom and gender equality.⁶⁶ A consistent motif of utopian socialism was that a rise in the status of women would indicate a victory of human nature over brutality, of brain over brawn, of intellect over violence.⁶⁷ Fourier advocated the replacement of monogamous marriage with a system allowing much greater latitude for sexual passions, since monogamy was contrary to human nature and was an impediment to human happiness. In *Anti-Dühring* (1878) Engels praised Fourier's 'masterful' critique of the bourgeois form of sexual relationships and the position of the woman in bourgeois society.

In 1825 utopian socialist William Thompson published *An Appeal of One Half of the Human Race*, a comprehensive and penetrating analysis of women's oppression which had been heavily influenced by Anglo-Irish utopian socialist Anna Wheeler. Thompson and Wheeler argued that a society based on individual competition, was 'absolutely irreconcilable with equality of women with men'. Only 'mutual cooperation' could provide basis for women's emancipation.⁶⁸ Four years later, Frances Wright argued that eradicating selfishness and creating an equal society depended on the collective care and education of children, who must be 'raised in national institutions, as the children of a common family and citizens of a common country'.⁶⁹

Owen developed these themes in his 'Lectures on the Marriages of the Priesthood' (1835). Owen outlined a new system of living in which 'equalisation of knowledge, rights and wealth between the sexes' would produce equality and therefore happiness.⁷⁰ Once both women and men relied on communal provision, male domination would lose all economic foundation. The collectivisation of domestic drudgery would release women from their role as 'passive machines for producing children', in privatised families which were 'centres of male despotism'.⁷¹

Within utopian socialist circles women created a space within which they could organise and theorise the relationship between women's oppression and the competition and exploitation inherent in the capitalist system. Female followers of Fourier and Saint-Simon established the first autonomous women's movement in Europe which coalesced around the *Tribune des Femmes*. The *Tribune* was written by a group of utopian socialist women who described themselves as proletarians and used only their first names to symbolise their rejection of marital subjugation. Extraordinarily courageous and effective socialist leaders such as Désirée Gay, Suzanne Voilquin, Pauline Roland and Jeanne Deroin were all were part of an international network of radical and socialist women, which included Wheeler and Wright.⁷²

Engels' responses to this female activism are hard to unearth, but he was connected to these networks through the radical press, the *New Moral World* and *The Northern Star*. An appeal for solidarity from Jeanne Deroin and Pauline Roland issued from their prison cell was published in *The Northern Star* in 1852. Wright corresponded with *The Northern Star* in 1844 and 1845, the same years as Engels was himself contributing articles, although she enjoyed a much greater reputation than he did among their contemporaries. Engels was a friend of Helen MacFarlane, a Chartist lecturer, journalist and philosopher. MacFarlane first translated *The Communist Manifesto* into English for publication in Julian Harney's *Red Republican* magazine.⁷³ Female Owenite lecturers and Chartists were all part of a milieu of female socialists who were debating, theorising, and demonstrating in practice that women could be effective public speakers, writers and organisers.

All this theorising and organising meant that by the mid-nineteenth century many socialists rejected the institution of the family and favoured what were known as 'love-unions' or 'free unions'.⁷⁴ Popular hostility to the family could feed into wider struggles. Engels explained to readers of *The Northern Star* how an attempt to restrict access to divorce in Prussia was defeated by a militant campaign: 'The people have achieved a great triumph; they have by their steady and protracted opposition forced the King to abandon his pet measure, the proposed new law of divorce'. This showed, Engels argued, 'that the people are

strong, stand up against oppression and toil for the many and riches and wealth for the few'.⁷⁵ For Engels, divorce was a class issue which could inject opposition to economic inequality with confidence.

Neither Engels nor Marx instigated this family abolition trend among socialists, but they both contributed to it. Engels' critique of the family was radical and transformative. It began 1844 in an article in which he argued that the factory system meant the dissolution of the family because of its demand for women's and child labour.⁷⁶ Engels developed his critique of the family more substantially in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) in which he provided poignant examples of the experiences of working-class families. He depicted the noxious hovels that made a home life impossible, the neglect of children caused by the employment of fathers and mothers in factories that spelled doom for the working-class family. Engels describes how men and women worked for 12 or 13 hours a day and were forced to leave children in unsafe conditions and 'hence the accidents to which little children fall victims multiply in the factory districts to a terrible extent'. Women had to return to work three or four days after giving birth. Nursing mothers had to rush home to breastfeed in their lunch breaks and their breasts were often very painful and leaking milk.⁷⁷ Marx described the same process, observing how 'the mothers confiscated by capital, must try substitutes of some sort'.⁷⁸ Communists were widely accused of seeking to abolish the family and hold women in common. Marx and Engels defended communists against this accusation but did not reject the abolition of the family or advocate a return to a precapitalist family. Rather, they argued that the bourgeoisie had already done the job of abolishing the family through their factory system. Family abolition grew out of the destructive processes already at work in the early decades of capitalism.

Marx and Engels historicised the family by providing a theory of the origin of the family and demonstrating how changes in the family were primarily precipitated by economic forces.⁷⁹ As capitalism transformed the means of production, it also undermined the established conditions of social reproduction. Engels and Marx both argued that it was not the family, but the absence of the family, which was the original and natural state of humanity. In a future communist society, the absence of private property would contribute to a far freer relationships, since women would not be dependent on any man. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels reiterated what he and Marx had argued in their early writings, that in a communist society private housework would be supplanted by social labour. Not only would women work in factories, but private housework would be converted into a public industry with communal childcare, cooking, and laundry. Engels asserted that only with the abolition

of the family could women play an equal role in society and sexual love emerge as the dominant form of sexual relationship.

Recently, there has been a re-emergence of concern with the conditions of social reproduction and family abolitionist thinking. Contemporary debates about abolishing the family articulate issues arising from neoliberalism and the entry of women into the labour force. However, today's family abolitionist thinkers resurrect the stance of the utopian socialists two hundred years ago. The Owenites argued that the family incubated competition and selfish feelings which undermined potential solidarity and cooperation. Sophie Lewis, author of *Abolish the Family* (2022) describes how, 'Like a microcosm of the nation state, the family incubates chauvinism and competition'.⁸⁰ Lewis also focuses on the role of the family as an infinitely renewable energy source which it performs free labour for the market. 'The family functions as the cell of the social tissue of capitalism'.⁸¹ Like Thompson and Wheeler, Lewis sees the family as an indispensable element of capitalist competition.

Contemporary advocates for family abolition emphasise that the family is a 'site of violence from within and without'.⁸² M. E. O'Brien writes persuasively that, 'The family of the present is impossible. It is torn between the violence and precarity of racial capitalism, the excessive demands of daily labour, and collective yearnings for freedom'.⁸³ This is reminiscent of Thompson and Wheeler's critique of the family as a site of 'male despotism' and Frances Wright's critique of 'male supremacy' and the selfish instincts of the male.⁸⁴

There are of course, differences between visions of change generated 200 years apart. Notably, O'Brien presents a historical view of the end of the housewife, the dismantling of state provision for care and the massive growth of the free market in childcare, health care and care for the elderly. Utopian socialists did not expect the state to provide life-giving services. Their choice was between collective living or private social reproduction within the family. Despite such important differences, the idea that changes to the structure of the family were integral to radical change was central to utopian socialism and remains key to family abolitionists. As Barbara Taylor wrote about the Owenite family abolitionists:

Making babies, making marriages, making love – for the Owenite feminists these were all integrated into the making of a new world. Only a complete transformation of family life and sexual attitudes would free women and only the [Owenite] Social System would revolutionize personal relationships in this way. No half-way measures would do.⁸⁵

As Engels put it, 'Full freedom of marriage can only be generally established when the abolition of capitalist production and of the property relations created by it has removed all the accompanying economic considerations which still exert such a powerful influence on the choice of a marriage partner.'⁸⁶ Today's abolitionists understand that 'Abolishing the family' can only occur as one dimension of a broader collective liberation'.⁸⁷ The question is what strategies can best conjure up a movement for liberation. O'Brien describes how widescale protest movements necessarily raise the question of childcare as women are inevitably involved in both community and work-place struggles. Family abolition depends on militant protest and class struggle; it does not generate that activism.

Penal Abolitionism

Another relevant strand of abolitionist thinking and organising has focused on the abolition of the penal system. This diverse and energetic movement consistently highlights the racial, gender and class inequalities which are both reflected in and reinforced by America's military industrial complex and criminal justice system.⁸⁸ America has witnessed an extraordinary level of incarceration which creates more harm than it prevents. Both family abolition and penal abolition highlight the systemic violence and widespread harm inherent in both institutions, the intense pressure placed on women by the burden of unpaid labour, and the destruction of primarily Black and brown lives in the criminal justice system. Their advocates force debates on racist and punitive incarceration and the multiple repressions inherent in the privatised family.

The calls for family abolition and the movement for penal abolition occupy political common ground and shared theoretical visions. Both acknowledge their debts to Charles Fourier who is acknowledged in both Angela Davis et al. *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*,⁸⁹ in Lewis's *Abolish the Family*,⁹⁰ and O'Brien's *Family Abolition*.⁹¹ Neither penal nor family abolition constitute a call for a simple deletion of infrastructure. Both position themselves as world-building endeavours and as collective acts of creativity.⁹² As a recent abolitionist manifesto says: 'Abolition is by necessity speculative, and we ardently embrace its utopian dimension'.⁹³ Abolitionist movements reject the idea that their demands are 'impractical, unattainable, a dream' because, they argue, vision and practice are not contradictory but are inseparable. Naming and describing a final goal can strengthen the daily fight for change.⁹⁴ Penal abolitionists who are working to dismantle carceral systems are simultaneously building different ways of living which exchange prison industrial complex, gender violence, criminalisation of radical democratic protests and for mutual aid, cop-free schools, reproductive justice and dignity for trans

lives.⁵⁵ As Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes, ‘Abolition is not only about “absence” (efforts to dismantle death-making institutions) but about “presence” (building life-affirming and life-enabling communities in their place)’.

Historically, utopian socialists tended to underplay the repressive powers of the state. They believed it could be captured by universal suffrage, subverted by new structures or bypassed by the expansion of communes. Owen believed that a ‘House of Trades’, made up of the representatives of both workers and sympathetic employers, could replace the houses of parliament and supersede the capitalist state.⁵⁶ Opposition to the actions of the state, for example the campaign against the hated New Poor Law 1834, focused on opposing ‘class legislation’ by granting the vote to working class men and in some instances, women. The British government, under significant and diverse pressures, enacted several significant reforms including protective legislation such as the Ten Hours Bill (1847), several public health acts, and the criminalisation of child abuse. These new laws suggested that the state could be used to ameliorate hardships faced by working-class and the poor. Such complacent attitudes to the state were contested sharply by the experience of the Paris Commune of 1871. After the Commune, Engels and Marx began to see the state as an institution which could not be captured but had to be dismantled and replaced.

Today’s penal abolitionists echo the aspirations of pre-1871 utopian socialists. They produce powerful propaganda which exposes the harmful power of the state and theorise about potential alternatives based on community-based restorative justice. However, enormously powerful state machines cannot be circumvented or eroded by vigorous campaigning combined with the creation of prefigurative ways of living based on cooperation, equality and solidarity. The penal abolitionists develop strategies for uprooting the penal system as part of an emancipatory change to reduce social inequalities and eradicate the causes of ‘criminal’ behaviour.

Engels’ analysis of utopian socialism can help to map out a socialist response to today’s utopian, abolitionist and anti-capitalist movements. Engels recognised the interdependence of the family, private property, and the state. He analysed how the development of private property and the rise of antagonistic classes led both to the development of the monogamous family, the ‘world historic defeat of the female sex’, and the development of the state as an instrument of coercive power. The family, private property and the state are all barriers which stand in the way of a socialist society. However, the insight Engels injected into abolitionist and utopian sentiments was the primacy of the class struggle as the motor of social change. Fourier and Owen saw the abolition of the family as part and parcel of their socialist proposals to ameliorate society. In contrast, Engels and Marx believed that the abolition of private property and the introduction of so-

cialism would bring in its wake a dissolution of the family. Abolishing the family will only be possible on a mass scale in a revolution.⁹⁷ In similar terms, a social revolution will not begin with the demand to dismantle the state apparatus. The state will necessarily be overthrown in the process of a socialist revolution, when its repressive intent is exposed to the majority of the society as they simultaneously discover they have the capacity to overpower and replace the state.

Conclusion

In 1874, Engels acknowledged that socialism:

will never forget that it stands on the shoulders of Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen, three men who despite their fantasies, and utopianism are to be reckoned among the most significant minds of all times, for they anticipated with genius countless matters whose accuracy we now demonstrate scientifically.⁹⁸

Utopian socialist thinking can both stimulate and circumscribe revolutionary thinking. It can encourage radical, broad-based critiques of capitalism and pierce the capitalist realism that means it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. As Engels established, strategies confined to propaganda and example cannot mobilise the potential power of working-class struggle. The multiple harms, inequalities, and injustices we face are rooted in capitalism. Strategies based on working-class organisation have the potential to realise the systemic change on which utopias depend. It is not possible to imagine abolishing penal systems without addressing the social causes of crime, inequality, alienation, racism and addiction. Halting and reversing climate catastrophe is incompatible with the irresistible drive for profits which pumps the economic blood round the capitalist system. It is not possible to imagine abolishing the family without uprooting women's oppression and restructuring economic organisation. We need to believe another world is possible, while identifying the tools we need to build it among the descendants of the working-class socialists who transformed Engels' life when he met them in Manchester in 1842.

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