Book Review: Fredrich Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State

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Fredrich Engels is probably best known for co-writing *The Communist Manifesto* with Karl Marx. Although Marx took the centre-stage, his contribution in the making of Marx is undeniable. Engels was not only Marx’s source of finance as he supported Marx’s family for almost three decades and he also provided withcritical input and together gave the materialist conception of history.

This book is his most popular and important solo work which he wrote after Marx’s death. It is based on Marx’s précis of *Ancient Society* (1877), a book by Lewis Henry Morgan which is regarded as one of the first to apply a materialist analysis to tell the story of how human social organization had evolved over time. Engels used Marx’s notes, Morgan’s factual material and conclusions and data from his own studies of the history of Greece, Rome, Old Ireland, and the Ancient Germans.The first edition was published in 1884 in German and it got translated in English only in 1902.

The book as the title suggests, is about how the traditional monogamous form of family as the dominant form evolved, its connection to the development of private property and class society leading to the emergence of state. Like Karl Marx, he too believed in materialistic determinism, history of class struggle as the context of all written history. With this ideological basis, he developed this book moving beyond the exploitation of proletariat to understand the oppression of women, thereby adding the gender dimension. Thus, it is regarded as one of the first major works on family economics.

Engels proposes that materialist conception of history is two-fold- first is the production of the means of existences like food, clothing and tools and second, the production of human beings themselves. In his words, “social organization under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live is determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labour on the one hand and of the family on the other” (p.36). The amount of production increases with the development of labour which in turn increases the wealth of the society. Also the more pronounced the development of labour gets, the wealth of society starts to get controlled by private property, difference in class struggle and state, and the less the wealth of society is managed by kinship systems.

The book has nine chapters, beginning with the stages of pre-historic culture, to family and rise of state and civilization. In the first chapter, Engels presents the stages of prehistoric culture as illuminated by Morgan. Morgan’s work was based on studying the Iroquois Indian of New York at close quarters which led him to compare other Native Americans. Morgan discovered that the kinship system among the Natives were completely different from that of modern monogamous family. With this observation, he concludes that human history must have evolved through different stages of development. He gave three main stages; savagery which is referred to as the hunting-gathering or foraging stage, barbarism with the development of agriculture and civilization, when industries and urban societydevelops. They used these terms as mere classificatory and thus were value neutral.

Following Morgan’s stages of development and his data on kinship system, Engels describe the development of the family in each stage drawing inferences from kinship terminologies. In the first stage which practiced primitive communism, the division of labour was present with women as the nurturer and gatherer and man as the hunter. But it provided women a higher status as their productive role was more than men. Women not only contributed in providing food, they also provided the progeny and nurtured them. Being sexually free, at this stage, humans engaged in sex with multiple partners and hence only the maternal genealogy could be confirmed. With this cause, he proposes that the matrilineal clan must be the first domesticated institution of human history. This was controversial for the victoria era when the book was published as till then the history of family was influenced by religion.

With the domestication of animals and advent of agriculture, humans were able to generate surplus or accumulate wealth. Till community farming was practiced, women continued to have a higher status. What changed the power structure is the domestication of animals by men who earlier took part in hunting the game. It generated difference in wealth among men and hence a need and want to trace male genealogy too emerged so that the wealth could be passed on to the next generation. This might be the first cause to restrict women to monogamy and the birth of modern family where men became the head of the household.This eventually gave rise to class society where inequality continued to rise between those who could accumulate wealth and those who did not, and also between men and women.

With the materialist conception of history, the focus was on change in control in the sphere of production and its consequent effects on gender and society at large. The monogamous family became the means through which property could pass down and hence marriage might have evolved as the first contract to legitimise property relationship. The wish for more surplus demanded more labour which in turn put women to produce more children and limit them to the domestic sphere. To quote,

“The overthrow of mother right was the world historic defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children. . . . In order to make certain of the wife’s fidelity and therefore the paternity of his children, she is delivered over unconditionally into the power of the husband; if he kills her, he is only exercising his rights” (p. 87).

According to Marx, modern family contains the germ of slavery and serfdom, since from the beginning it was related to services like agriculture, child rearing, and management of the household. It was like the miniature of all the contradictions found later in society and state with the rise of class.

Based on the three stages, Engels describes types of family that arises and eventually transitions to the modern monogamous family. The first stage of family is the consanguine family in which norms of group marriage exists. In other words, men and women of same generation shares sexual relationship and sex with older or younger generation was prohibited. At this stage, even though both men and women engaged in non-monogamous relationship, women played a decisive role for the lineage of children could only be made through the mother. In the second stage, the punaluan family, the incest taboos were extended to siblings and cousins. The separation of patriarchal and matriarchal gentes was done. In the third stage, the pairing family with the notion of husband and wife evolves parallels with the barbarian and civilization stage. The notion of property begins to shape this kind of family and eventually leads to subjugation of women as a result of the shift from matrilineal to patrilineal system.

Engels was hopeful of capitalism in bringing in gender justice as women would start working and earning own sustenance, thereby breaking free from shackles of the domestic sphere. It is true that capitalism did help women to come out of the domestic, but Engels would be dismayed to see how it ended up burdening the women with double work. Further, he could not estimate the power of ideology that played a role in the acceptance of perceived inequality of gender as natural.

The book was monumental and foundational in establishing Marxist feminism. His identification of both production and reproduction as the material bases of society has lent much to the development of feminist methodology (Bose, 1988, p. 197). The book may be critiqued for its evolutionary perspective which does not looks at the dialectics of the process, but one has to give credit to its merit on challenging the dominant religious understanding of family at that period of time when religion was dominating in all aspects of life. It challenges the ‘natural’ nature of male dominance from a historical materialist account. This challenge on the ‘naturalness’ of patriarchy and proposing that gender is a socially and historically created construct, is what makes it relevant even today.

***Reference***

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