Chapter Six
Engels: a Defective Formulation

Having arrived in 1850 as an exile from the political storms on the continent, Engels remained in Manchester for two decades, employed in the family textile-firm. A secure and growing income enabled him to assist Marx, continually in financial difficulty during these years. In 1870, on the eve of the Paris Commune, and with developments in the International quickening, Engels liquidated his partnership in the business and moved to London, where he could more fully participate in political life. Until Marx’s death in 1883, the two friends worked side-by-side in the socialist movement, daily discussing every aspect of their political and theoretical work. With Marx, Engels sat on the General Council of the International, and worked to unify the various trends within the socialist movement. And like Marx, he played the part of dean and adviser to the movement after the International’s collapse, continuing in this function up to his death in 1895.

During these last twenty years of his life, Engels also embarked on a wide-ranging programme of research and writing. Among his published works, two well-known and extremely popular books touch on the problem of women’s oppression. Together with The Communist Manifesto these texts acted as fundamental guides for the emerging generation of socialists.

Engels produced the work that became known as Anti-Dühring in 1878 as a polemic against the views of the socialist Eugen Dühring. The book presents a comprehensive exposition of what Engels saw as ‘the communist world outlook fought for by Marx and myself’.
Naturally enough, that outlook included some comments on women, the family, and the reproduction of the working class, which generally recapitulate his own and Marx’s earlier analyses and positions. In a survey of pre-Marxist socialist thinkers, for instance, Engels approves Fourier’s critique of the relations between the sexes and of women’s position in capitalist society, and asserts, following Marx’s free paraphrase of Fourier in *The Holy Family*, that the utopian socialist was the first to regard woman’s position as an index of general social development.1 Engels also reviews a number of themes discussed in previous works: the determination of the value of labour-power, the effects of machinery on the working-class family, the emergence of an industrial reserve-army, the character of bourgeois marriage as a legal form of prostitution, and the progressive dissolution of traditional family-bonds, including ‘patriarchal subordination’, with the advance of capitalism.2 Looking at the family in earlier societies, Engels speaks of ‘the natural division of labor within the family’, and with some qualification, subsumes all members of a household under its male head.3 Finally, Engels insists that family-forms are rooted in social relations, and thus that the family can change if society is transformed. In this context, he draws a critical programmatic corollary from Marx’s statement in *Capital* that capitalism creates the foundation for such changes. What is necessary is not only ‘the free association of men’, but ‘the transformation of private domestic work into a public industry’. This is the first formulation within the classical-Marxist tradition of a position later to become a central tenet of socialist strategy.4

Engels’s other major book from this period is the famous *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, written between March and May of 1884, published that October, and instantaneously accorded the place of a socialist classic.

The circumstances of Engels’s startlingly rapid production of the *Origin* remain somewhat mysterious. The book is based, as its subtitle (‘In the Light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan’) indicates, on Morgan’s *Ancient Society*, which had appeared in 1877 and immediately engaged Marx’s interest. Writing to the German socialist Kautsky on 16 February 1884, Engels described the late Marx’s enthusiasm for Morgan’s book, adding ‘if I had the time I would work up the material, with Marx’s notes,… but I cannot even think of it’. Yet by late March he was already at work on the *Origin* and by the end of April close to

1. Engels 1947, p. 308. For Marx’s paraphrase of Fourier, see note 2 of Chapter 4.
4. Engels 1947, p. 377. The question of changes in the organisation of domestic labour had, of course, long been a concern among utopian thinkers; see, for example, Hayden 1981.