

Volume 2: Chapter 10

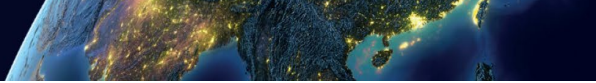
Source 10.1

Alexandra Kollontai, *Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Marital Relations* (1921)

During and immediately after World War I, women in various parts of the world gained new political and voting rights. This period was the culmination of the “first wave” feminist movement, which grew in the nineteenth century as women increasingly advocated for political participation and equality. Simultaneously, during World War I the Communist Party gained power in Russia, forming the Soviet Union. Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952) was a leading figure in Russia’s revolutionary movement, who served as the first woman in the Soviet government as the “People’s Commissar for Social Welfare” under Vladimir Lenin. She developed feminist theory in the context of Marxism and communism, arguing that women’s liberation was a critical part of the broader concept of socialist revolution.

The fact that with the consolidation of the capitalist system of production, the marital/family union develops from a production unit into a legal arrangement concerned only with consumption, leads inevitably to the weakening of marital/family ties. In the era of private property and the bourgeois-capitalist economic system, marriage and the family are grounded in (a) material and financial considerations, (b) economic dependence of the female sex on the family breadwinner – the husband – rather than the social collective, and (c) the need to care for the rising generation. Capitalism maintains a system of individual economies: the family has a role to play in performing economic tasks and functions within the national capitalist economy ...

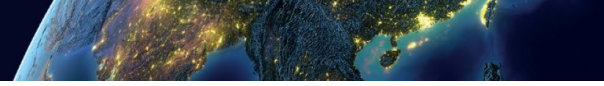
The communist economy does away with the family. In the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat there is a transition to the single production plan and collective social consumption, and the family loses its significance as an economic unit. The external



economic functions of the family disappear, and consumption ceases to be organized on an individual family basis, a network of social kitchens and canteens is established. And the making, mending and washing of clothes and other aspects of housework are integrated into the national economy. In the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat the family economic unit should be recognized as being, from the point of view of the national economy, not only useless but harmful. The family economic unit involves (a) the uneconomic expenditure of products and fuel on the part of small domestic economies, and (b) unproductive labor, especially by women. in the home – and is therefore in conflict with the interest of the workers’ republic in a single economic plan and the expedient use of the labor force (including women) ...

The family teaches and instils egoism thus weakening the ties of the collective and hindering the construction of communism. However, in the new society relations between parents and children are freed from any element of material considerations and enter a new historic stage. Once the family has been stripped of its economic functions and its responsibilities towards the younger generation and is no longer central to the existence of the woman, it has ceased to be a family. The family unit shrinks to a union of two people based on mutual agreement ...

In the transitional period, relations between men and women must, in order to meet the interests of the workers’ collective, be based on the following considerations. (1) All sexual relationships must be based on mutual inclination, love, infatuation or passion, and in no case on financial or material motivations. All calculation in relationships must be subject to merciless condemnation. (2) The form and length of the relationship are not regulated, but the hygiene of the race and communist morality require that relationships be based not on the sexual act alone, and that it should not be accompanied by any excesses that threaten health. (3) Those with illnesses etc. that might be inherited should not have children. (4) A jealous



and proprietary attitude to the person loved must be replaced by a comradely understanding of the other and an acceptance of his or her freedom. Jealousy is a destructive force of which communist morality cannot approve. (5) The bonds between the members of the collective must be strengthened. The encouragement of the intellectual, and political interests of the younger generation assists the development of healthy and bright emotions in love.

Source: Alix Holt ed., *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1980): 225-231.

- In your own words, how do you understand Kollontai's argument about marriage and the family as a form of "economic relations"?
- Do you think her argument is convincing? Why or why not?
- Kollontai claims that capitalism weakened family ties by transforming families from production units into mere consumption units. In your view, how does this analysis compare to contemporary debates about the decline of traditional family structures?
- In your view, what are the positive and negative features of Kollontai's vision of marital and sexual relations under communism?