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## Emancipation Through Communism: The Ideology of A. M. Kollontai

Traditionally in surveys of Soviet history, if Alexandra Kollontai is mentioned she is presented briefly as the advocate of the “glass of water theory of sex,”<sup>1</sup> a woman who practiced free love as freely as she preached it. The lecturer then moves on to more serious concerns, having ignored the history of a tormented, perceptive woman intimately involved in the early Soviet experiment in female emancipation. Kollontai advocated far more than free love, and the role she played was far greater than that of mistress to Alexander Shliapnikov. From 1917 until her departure from the Soviet Union in 1923 she held positions of major importance in the young government and in the Bolshevik party. Kollontai worked first as an agitator in 1917, then took the post of commissar of state welfare from November 1917 to March 1918, when she resigned in protest against the Brest-Litovsk Treaty. In 1921 she joined the Workers’ Opposition, adding to Shliapnikov’s proposals for trade-union reform her own call for party and government democratization and giving articulate voice to those demands in an often-cited pamphlet, *The Workers’ Opposition*. Throughout the revolutionary years she was recognized as a major authority on the problems of women and child care. Since Kollontai did play an important role in the early period of Soviet history, her personality and ideology warrant study. That study in turn reveals a woman who perceived the problems of womanhood with clarity and who wrote about and sought a liberation beyond the comprehension of many of her contemporaries.

In 1872 Kollontai was born Alexandra Mikhailovna Domontovich, the daughter of minor nobility. Her parents gave her a liberal education at home

1. In fact, this author has yet to read that specific phrase in Kollontai’s writings. The nearest instance is a passage written in 1921 (quoted below) in which she said sex should be “natural . . . like the satisfying of hunger and thirst.” The one contemporary who specifically referred to the “drink of water theory” was Lenin, in his famous interview with Klara Zetkin in 1919. See Klara Zetkin, *Lenin on the Woman Question* (New York, 1934), p. 11. Possibly he drew the phrase from the popularized, vulgarized version of Kollontai’s thought then circulating in Russia as a justification for promiscuity. For a discussion of sexual behavior in the Civil War years see H. Kent Geiger, *The Family in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), pp. 73–75.

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until she reached adolescence, when they refused to send her to the university for fear of the revolutionary ideas she might encounter. Instead they hired professors to tutor her. At sixteen Alexandra rebelled by refusing to consider an arranged marriage. She married instead a penniless army officer of whom her parents disapproved, and she bore his name, Kollontai, for the rest of her life. They lived together for three years, but the relationship proved too confining for Alexandra. "The happy existence of housewife and consort were like a 'cage' to me," she wrote later. "My sympathies, my interests turned more and more to the Russian workers' revolutionary movement."<sup>2</sup> When Kollontai left her husband in 1898 for study in Switzerland, she plunged herself fully into the Social Democratic movement. She participated in the revolutionary activities of 1905, fled into exile at the end of 1908, and as a Menshevik spent the period until 1917 in exile lecturing and writing, predominantly on the woman question. In 1915 she joined the Bolsheviks largely because of her antiwar sentiments.

Yet political activity alone never fully satisfied her. Though unable to accept the traditional female roles, she still had strong affiliational needs which compelled her to search for satisfying heterosexual relationships. From her own account, that search always ended in failure. Occasionally she would see herself as incapable of genuine intimacy, but more often she laid the blame on the social mores which taught men to objectify women rather than love them as equals. Kollontai felt such a relationship destroyed her integrity, her "I." "The need of a woman," she wrote, "is that a man love in her not only her impersonal femininity but also that he value in her that which makes up the spiritual content of her individual I."<sup>3</sup>

The traditional conditioning which drove Kollontai to seek men also taught her to want to be dependent on them. But her desire for integrity made her despise that need and the men who cultivated it.<sup>4</sup> Unable to be satisfied with the submissive role she tried to play, Kollontai would create a relationship in which she dominated the man. But domination proved no more satisfactory than dependence. Furthermore, the whole frustrating process took her away from worthwhile party work. After much unhappiness she

2. Alexandra Kollontai, *Autobiographie einer sexuell emanzipierten Kommunistin*, ed. Iring Fetscher (Munich, 1970), p. 16. Editor Fetscher italicized all words changed by Kollontai on the galleys of the *Autobiographie*. To avoid confusion, his italics will not be indicated here. His edition has been translated into English as *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*, ed. with an afterword by Iring Fetscher, trans. Salvator Attanasio (New York, 1971).

3. Kollontai, *Novaia moral' i rabochii klass* (Moscow, 1918), p. 21.

4. The theme of the female need for dependence on the male recurs frequently in her work. See, for example, the attack on this "atavistic" tendency in *Novaia moral'*, p. 13. Her fictional heroines always battled such a need; see *A Great Love*, trans. Lily Lore (New York, 1929).

would realize that the psychological price of the involvement outweighed its yield, and she would break away—resentful of the time wasted—to return to work. “How much more we could have created and achieved,” she wrote, “if our complete energy had not been divided in an endless struggle with our own I and with the feelings for another. Indeed, there was an eternal defensive war against the encroachment of men on our I, a struggle revolving about the problem: work or marriage and love” (*Autobiographie*, p. 11). She generally chose work.

Throughout her life Kollontai’s party career and her ideology satisfied her psychological needs more fully than the men she tried to love. She retained enough of her early conditioning to seek heterosexual relationships as a means of establishing self-esteem.<sup>5</sup> At the same time she set out to define her worth in the nontraditional sphere of revolutionary activity, and here in her ideology she found the means to defeat the mores still troublesome to her own psyche. Kollontai’s ideology offers a perceptive analysis of the problems of women in rebellion against the prescriptions of society, then promises resolution in utopia.

All Bolsheviks shared certain premises—economic determinism, the necessity of a highly organized party, the eventual realization of utopia—but they varied individually in the centrality of these elements in their belief systems.<sup>6</sup> For example, the faith in natural, unregulated human instinct as a force for good played an important role in Kollontai’s ideology, but it was minor in Lenin’s. The central idea-elements determine both the less central ideological commitments and the pragmatic decisions drawn from ideological evaluation of reality. In all persons they change slowly; in Kollontai they seem to have remained essentially the same from 1903 to 1922, with one exception. Two contradictory elements, her staunch economic determinism and the belief that a purposive change in attitude must coincide with economic transformation, seem to have changed positions over the course of the Revolution—the latter becoming the more important to her under the pressure of administrative experience. Nonetheless, given her relative ideological consistency, the fundamental idea-elements of Kollontai’s Marxism may be discussed by drawing on pre- and post-1917 writings without fear of obscuring any major development.

Her general analysis of West European bourgeois society followed orthodox economic determinism. She believed the theoretical bases of Marxism

5. For the importance of affiliational need in the traditional female personality see Judith Bardwick, *The Psychology of Women* (New York, 1970), pp. 157–58.

6. The contents of the following paragraph and the term “idea-element” were suggested by Clifford Geertz, “Ideology as a Cultural System,” pp. 47–76, and Philip Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” pp. 206–61, both in David E. Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (New York, 1964).

to be the doctrine of historical materialism and the labor theory of value. From these two sets of premises came the theory of the class struggle as the dynamic of history. A product wholly of the economic substructure, class interest created the conflicting groups of a society, who shared nothing with one another save mutual enmity. Thus meaningful reform of oppressive conditions proved theoretically impossible under capitalism, even if that reform came at the urging of the proletariat.<sup>7</sup> In the present, however, Kollontai saw the hope for the future, for capitalism's growth was producing a burgeoning work force, socialization of production, and the assumption by government of social services.<sup>8</sup> These phenomena combined with worker impoverishment "to operate with the force of 'natural law' on the psychology of the proletariat," producing worker consciousness, which paved the way for revolution.<sup>9</sup>

To this widely held interpretation Kollontai added a premise, an idea-element, unusual among Bolsheviks. She felt the untutored proletarian would instinctively work for the "ideal of collectivism," because he unconsciously knew it was to his advantage.<sup>10</sup> Many socialists shared this idealization of the worker, including the Bolsheviks, but that latter group stood ideologically committed in their vanguard theory of the party to the premise that the unguided proletariat would only achieve "trade-union mentality." Kollontai never accepted this premise—not in 1905 when she defended trade-union independence, not in 1915 when she joined Lenin, and not in 1921 when she again defended trade-union independence. Her commitment to natural proletarian goodness, and therefore to the importance of *samodeiatel'nost'* (spontaneity) for successful revolution, proved a central idea-element in her Marxism throughout her life. In a 1912 book, *Po rabochei Evrope*, she presented a worker as wiser than the party agitator who attempted to deduce union policy decisions from doctrine. Waving aside consideration of class composition, which the intellectual pressed on him, the factory hand said patiently, "I am a proletarian myself, I drink this cup every day, and I know that it wasn't agitational speeches but life itself that drew me onto the path of struggle."<sup>11</sup> Unlike many Bolsheviks, Kollontai built her Marxism on a deep, anarchistic faith in the ability of human beings (usually modified to read "workers") to organize and run their lives harmoniously if left free of institutional interference. The people were to be trusted, and external authority distrusted.

7. Kollontai, *Zhizn' Finliandskikh rabochikh* (St. Petersburg, 1903), pp. 106, 277; Kollontai, . . . *K voprosu o klassovoi bor'be* (St. Petersburg, 1905), p. 17.

8. *K voprosu o klassovoi bor'be*, p. 7; Kollontai, *Kto takie sotsial'-demokraty i chego oni khotiat* (Minsk, n.d.), p. 10.

9. *Zhizn' Finliandskikh rabochikh*, p. 124.

10. *K voprosu o klassovoi bor'be*, pp. 12–13.

11. Kollontai, *Po rabochei Evrope* (St. Petersburg, 1912), p. 16.

In her analysis of bourgeois society Kollontai considered the position of women the subject of her “most important theoretical-socialist and economic works.”<sup>12</sup> She drew heavily on the writings of Marx, Engels, and August Bebel, especially when dealing with the origins of female oppression.<sup>13</sup> Women had lived free and equal until the development of private property, when they became slaves—“parasites” shut up in the home with no economic function save that of brood mare.<sup>14</sup> Their status improved somewhat in the Middle Ages, when educated noblewomen often managed large estates. Kollontai added somewhat muddled praise of peasant respect for the mother figure, a strange comment in light of the Russian peasants’ brutal treatment of their women.<sup>15</sup> With the development of a money economy, women again became the physical and spiritual property of men, as the bourgeois stress on feminine virtues encouraged female stupidity and concern with triviality.

Although she always began her writing on women’s status with this simplistic sketch of its origin, Kollontai’s main concern lay in the present, and it was to the analysis of modern capitalism that she devoted her major attention. In bourgeois society marriage and the family structure were based on monetary considerations, the economic dependence of woman on man, and the need for a unit to rear children.<sup>16</sup> Among the proletariat the economic function of marriage had disintegrated, with the family following it into oblivion. Prostitution, a socially sanctioned institution, served as the burial ground of women made desperate by these processes. Under such conditions a healthy marriage became impossible, and relations between the sexes descended to a state marked by three main characteristics. First, the property basis of marriage encouraged each member to view the other as a possession, which he had the right to know completely. Kollontai denounced this demand for total knowledge as a denigration of the partner’s integrity. The lack of “privacy” destroyed genuine love. The second characteristic of modern marriage was female inequality, which encouraged the woman’s objectification. Kollontai labeled the third characteristic the “individualism” or “egocentricity” produced by bourgeois society. She stressed a charge common to both

12. Kollontai, “Kollontai, Aleksandra Mikhailovna,” *Deiateli SSSR i Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii: Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'*, supplement *Granat Entsiklopediia*, vol. 41, pts. 1–3 (Moscow and Leningrad, 1925–29), p. 201.

13. Marx’s comments on the subject are found throughout his works. See Jean Freville, *La femme et le communisme: Anthologie des grandes textes du Marxisme* (Paris, 1960). Engels’s major work on the subject is, of course, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, and Bebel’s is *Woman Under Socialism*.

14. Kollontai, . . . *Trud zhenshchiny v evoliutsii khoziaistva (leksii chitannye v Universitete imeni Ia. M. Sverdlova)* (Moscow, 1923), p. 31.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

16. Kollontai, “Tezisy o kommunisticheskoi morali v oblasti brachnikh otnoshenii,” *Kommunistka*, no. 12–13 (May–June 1921), pp. 28–34.

Marxism and the Russian Slavophile evaluation of the West, that bourgeois society isolated human beings: "We all live and think under the heavy burden of . . . spiritual solitude. This 'solitude' among the masses of the people, of the pressing-raging, crying-noisy cities, this solitude in a crowd of even close 'friends and comrades-in-arms' forces contemporary man with sick greed to snatch at the illusion of a 'near soul' " (*Novaia moral'*, p. 51). To overcome his loneliness man tried to find another person, a loved one, to whom he could be close, but he did so selfishly with the single goal of fulfilling his own needs. Bourgeois society never taught him that he could not have the "spiritual closeness and understanding" he wanted if he treated his lover like an object.

Kollontai had learned about solitude through a lonely childhood and an adulthood search for intimacy. She explained her failure to find the love she sought in social terms; it was Marxist and human to do so. Kollontai did not try to depersonalize her analysis; throughout she used the first-person plural. "We individualists, coarsened by the everlasting cult of our own 'I,' . . . imagine that we can seize the greatest happiness . . . without giving in return the treasure of our own soul" (*Novaia moral'*, p. 52).

Throughout her writings Kollontai's conflicts are inseparably linked with those of society. The search (her search) for someone to be close to could not succeed unless one (she) could lower her defenses completely. But that vulnerable position in bourgeois society risked the objectification of control by another. Kollontai cursed isolation and individuality on the societal level, but branded any attempt to find a genuinely close relationship as doomed to failure. Bourgeois society must die before the manipulative attitudes it fostered would be overcome. Hope existed only in the emerging emotion of proletarian consciousness, or "comradely solidarity," which would allow "spiritual closeness." The social conflicts which were Kollontai's conflicts existed inevitably in the bourgeois world, but the torment of their contradictions would be overcome by the new virtue growing from them.

Kollontai saw the seeds of the future growing in the present. Although she dated the women's rights movement from the American and French Revolutions, she felt its real incentive had been nineteenth-century industrialization (*Trud zhenshchiny*, p. 98). From that point it had taken a two-pronged course—bourgeois-feminist and proletarian. World War I had provided the final impetus to the development of female consciousness, in addition to making the economic contribution of women irreplaceable (p. 108). Exploited more than men, women workers revealed the drain on their strength in lowered birth rates, higher mother and infant mortality rates, and more abortions and stillbirths. Their economic value had forced some countries to enact protective legislation. Though inadequate, these laws were a step in the right direction. They had the added benefit of accelerating family disintegration,

thus speeding the development of proletarian consciousness and with it sexual equality and “comradely solidarity” (*Novaia moral'*, p. 52). In a pamphlet written during World War I Kollontai said, “The science of national economy, of the history of society and the state, shows that such a society should be and will be.”<sup>17</sup> But she certainly did not mean that human beings must not actively seek the goal. The proletariat must use “class struggle as a fact of life, class politics as a tactical principle” (*K voprosu o klassovoi bor'be*, p. 31). In 1904 Kollontai listed these requirements for success: unity, good organization, farsightedness, total dedication, unsentimentality, the ability to sacrifice present advantage to future goals, and the willingness to act without fear of the consequences (p. 30). She did not include the need for a centralized Marxist party.

For Lenin, revolution was impossible without the party, the vanguard which raised the proletariat to consciousness of its mission and guided it to the realization of its goal. For many the party became an infallible receptacle of truth. Kollontai does not seem to have felt such devotion, at least as regards the Bolsheviks, but the available data are meager and inconclusive. Before the Revolution she wrote, “The goal of life, its substance, is the party, the idea, agitation, work. . . .”<sup>18</sup> The reference here must be to the Social Democratic Party as a whole, since she had not then joined the Bolsheviks. In a post-revolutionary short story she said, “Natascha found a new satisfaction in the atmosphere of intense endeavor that surrounded her. For the first time she knew the satisfaction of being a tiny cog in a powerful mechanism beginning to rotate in resistless accomplishment” (*A Great Love*, p. 48). Here she may be describing either the Revolution or the party. In a 1923 novel, *Red Love*, Kollontai told the story of a woman whose comrade-husband had been corrupted by NEP. After she left him she described her feelings: “How many months was I walking about like a somnambulist! I wasn't conscious. I didn't live. I forgot the Party. But now I'm well again. Everything delights me now, everything's new to me. The old world still goes round. Vladimir may be gone, but the Party is there.”<sup>19</sup> This passage probably does refer to the Communist Party.

Such ambiguous sentences—typical of her writings on the subject—do not give substantial clues to the level of Kollontai's devotion to the party and its role in her ideology. One must, therefore, turn to her life's work itself. From that evidence the conclusion arises that although she joined Menshevik and then Bolshevik organizations, worked within them, and was willing on occa-

17. Kollontai, . . . *Rabotnitsa-mat'* (Petrograd, 1917), p. 21.

18. *Novaia moral'*, p. 9. The reference is to the first article in the book, “*Novaia zhenshchina*,” reprinted here. It originally appeared in 1913.

19. *Red Love* (New York, 1927), p. 283.

sion to submit to party discipline, she gave her real devotion and her most heartfelt ideological commitment to the achievement of communism; her receptacle of truth was the proletariat. Before 1917 this individualist who preached collectivism worked and argued with Bolsheviks and Mensheviks alike. After 1917 her oppositionist activity earned her Lenin's disgust. In 1925 she considered leaving the Bolsheviks altogether.<sup>20</sup> Kollontai's repeated refusal to change her opinions in the face of intense pressure indicates that the party never captured her unquestioning loyalty. Her faith in the native goodness of the proletariat kept her from accepting fully the Leninist party doctrine, and her belief in the imminent arrival of communism channeled much of her devotion to the utopian vision of a new society. Antiwar feeling brought her to the Bolsheviks initially. When the Revolution came, she stayed with them, because their leaders promised the most immediate realization of the new world Kollontai so ardently desired.

Although she did not fully subscribe to the vanguard theory of the party, neither could she accept Menshevik adherence to orthodox Marxism when dealing with the possibility of Russian revolution. In a pamphlet written in 1906 she outlined the course of Russian society after the bourgeois revolution. There should be established "a republic, in which all male and female citizens can be equal and in which state power will be located entirely in the hands of the people," who would exercise it through *zemstva* and other existing local organizations.<sup>21</sup> "The governing of the cities and *zemstva* . . . should rest in the hands of the working people and small peasants." Reforms would include full civil rights for all citizens, changes in the tax structure, confiscation of land by organs of local government, and an eight-hour work day. Militia and police functions would be performed by "the arming of all people."

This idea of society after the bourgeois revolution bears strong overtones of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, which asserted that in an agrarian society like Russia's, with its weakly developed bourgeoisie, the proletariat and peasantry would have to lead the capitalist stage of development. The workers, having accomplished that, would move on to build socialism with the assistance of general European revolution. Since Kollontai wrote the article in 1906, the year of Trotsky's definitive publication of the theory,<sup>22</sup> the extent of his influence on her cannot be established with certainty. The early date does, however, provide further evidence of Kollontai's lifelong concern with immediate revolutionary action. When she returned to Russia

20. Marcel Body, "Alexandra Kollontai," *Preuves* (Paris), no. 14 (April 1952), p. 19.

21. *Kto takie sotsial'-demokraty*, p. 14. This pamphlet is undated. Another edition bears the date 1918, but it is a reprint of the original article which appeared in *Rabochii ezhegodnik*, 1 (1906): 74-87.

22. Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed* (New York, 1954), pp. 148-50.



in 1917 she showed very little respect for the orthodox Marxist historical stages and no tendency to yield any control to the bourgeoisie.

This pamphlet also bears a strong resemblance to Lenin's *State and Revolution*, a work scholars label unrepresentative of his political theory.<sup>23</sup> Its anarchism may have been foreign to Lenin's world view, but it colored Kollontai's throughout. Distrust of bureaucracy and faith in *samodeiatel'nost'* recur repeatedly in her writing. In Germany immediately after the outbreak of World War I a Social Democrat told Kollontai that socialism could be built only by a bureaucratic regime offset by a well-organized party. Kollontai rejected out of hand the need for any bureaucracy at all.<sup>24</sup> Apparently she placed her hope in the ability of local institutions to lead the proletariat's creation of a new society, never doubting that a large, illiterate nation accustomed for centuries to an oppressively centralized government could make the transition to democracy once the corrupting influence of the state had been destroyed.

Kollontai's specific program for the bourgeois stage of Russian revolution dealt in some detail with reform for women workers. She listed as essential: (1) the prohibition of night work for women and adolescents, (2) an eight-hour day for women workers, (3) no work for children under sixteen, a half day for those sixteen to eighteen, and (4) the elimination of working conditions harmful to women's health. To care for working mothers, the state and/or localities should provide (1) factory nurseries, with time off during the day for nursing mothers to feed their babies, (2) maternity hospitals, (3) homes for single or unemployed mothers from pregnancy to weaning, (4) free medical care, (5) kindergartens, and (6) free food for pregnant and nursing mothers too poor to afford their own.<sup>25</sup>

Because Kollontai did not openly declare herself a supporter of the theory of permanent revolution, her vision of the Russian transition from the bourgeois stage to the dictatorship of the proletariat can only be surmised. Prob-

23. Robert V. Daniels, "The State and Revolution: A Case Study in the Genesis and Transformation of Communist Ideology," *American Slavic and East European Review*, 12, no. 1 (February 1953): 22-43; Adam B. Ulam, *The Bolsheviks* (New York, 1965), p. 353. For a recent analysis see Rodney Barfield, "Lenin's Utopianism: State and Revolution," *Slavic Review*, 30, no. 1 (March 1971): 45-56. Even Barfield notes that the essay is not representative of Lenin's "political philosophy" but of his "fundamental philosophy of man" (p. 56). For Kollontai the two aspects of her world view could not be divorced, since the "philosophy of man" dictated the "political philosophy" without any intervening distrust of human spontaneity.

24. Kollontai, . . . *Otryvki iz dnevnika 1914 g.* (Leningrad, 1923), p. 78. Since it appeared in 1923, the passage may also be an oblique criticism of the Soviet bureaucracy, against which Kollontai protested openly in 1921.

25. The contents of the foregoing are based on *Rabotnitsa-mat'*, pp. 22-30, but essentially the same program may be found in Kollontai, . . . *Obshchestvo i materinstvo* (Petrograd, 1916), pp. 18-20, 167, and in *Kto takie sotsial'-demokraty*, p. 14.

ably she saw the workers as growing in education and ability until they became capable of beginning the building of socialism. Certainly she saw the participation of women in the revolution as vital to its success, not only because of their numbers but also because their feminine mentality could complement creatively the masculine perspectives.<sup>26</sup> When consciousness had developed sufficiently, the new society would abolish private property and institute collectivized labor—replacing production for sale with production for demand.<sup>27</sup> Concurrent with economic reorganization would come change in the family structure and sexual relations. To this area of the dictatorship of the proletariat Kollontai devoted most of her attention. Laws fully protecting women and children would be enacted if they had not been already. Communal housing, kitchens, laundries, and repair shops would take over all domestic functions, thereby ensuring a great increase in female labor productivity and a healthy generation for future society.<sup>28</sup> Marital reform would abolish all economic bases of the institution, and parents would teach their children loyalty to the collective. These new people would then have no need to marry in order to find refuge from isolation. Assessing marriage from the point of view of the “health of the working population” and the advancement of “collective solidarity,” the dictatorship of the proletariat would base marriage on “mutual attraction, love, infatuation, or passion” (“Tezisy,” pp. 31–34). The family would wither away, for it would now be “not only useless but harmful” in its divisiveness and its wasteful expenditure of funds and labor, particularly female labor.

Once the required laws were enacted the dictatorship of the proletariat would have to use extensive agitation, for it could only change sexual relations and the family structure through “re-education of our psychology” (*Novoia moral'*, p. 57). Rather than evolve passively, a new morality would emerge only as a product of the struggle of the new order with the dying old one. Responding to the argument that sexual morality, a part of the superstructure, must change only after the economic substructure was rebuilt, Kollontai wrote: “As if the ideology of whatever class took shape when the break with the socioeconomic relations providing the mastery of a given class had already been accomplished! Every lesson of history teaches us that the elaboration of the ideology of a social group, and consequently of the sexual morality, is accomplished in the very process of the highly difficult struggle of given social groups with hostile social forces” (p. 60).

26. Kollontai, “Pis'ma k trudiasheia molodezhi; pis'mo 3; o 'drakone' i 'beloi ptitse,’” *Molodaia gvardia*, 1923, no. 2, p. 163.

27. *Kto takie sotsial'-demokraty*, p. 6.

28. Kollontai, “Excerpts from the Works of A. M. Kollontay,” in Rudolf Schlesinger, ed., *Changing Attitudes in Soviet Russia: The Family in the U.S.S.R.* (London, 1949), p. 52.

Not only did the proletarian ideology of which sexual mores formed a part develop during class struggle, it was necessary for it to do so if that struggle was to be won. Here Kollontai moved away from the simple materialism to which she elsewhere clung so tenaciously. Admittedly when she studied the change in social relations, she could find little concrete in the writings of Marx or Engels from which to deduce her argument. Perhaps the uncompromising determinism she displayed elsewhere was an effort to conform to the party line. For whatever reason, three years after writing the passage quoted above she seemed to return to orthodoxy: "Communism, organizing production on new principles of universal labor, will solve the woman question at the same time" (*Trud zhenshchiny*, p. 128).

Which of these statements represents her genuine conviction? Essentially Kollontai seems to have felt that economic change had to be accompanied by equally strong attempts to create new attitudes and new "social relations." Economic change alone would not assure the achievement of a communist society. Her main writing on the question is the 1918 work *Novaia moral' i rabochii klass*, composed after her stint as commissar. Perhaps the difficulties she encountered in that post weakened her belief in simple determinism, but since she had first begun working with women in 1905 she had felt that efforts to change attitudes must be as purposefully organized as economic reform. In *Obshchestvo i materinstvo*, a lengthy prewar study of the conditions of women workers, she had written that the problem of the sexes would be facilitated, but not resolved automatically, by the Revolution (pp. 570–71). In her never-ending campaigns to gain party acceptance for her projects she bore witness to that conviction. But the pressure of conforming to the orthodox line, and her own theoretical shortcomings, prevented her from resolving the ideological contradiction.

With the dictatorship of the proletariat accomplished, society would move on to history's final stage—socialism-communism. The aspects of contemporary life to which Kollontai devoted greatest attention were characteristics that were also most troublesome in her own personality. Her vision of society under communism stressed resolution of the same problems. Communism existed for Kollontai not in a never-to-be-seen promised land but in the near future—achievable if earnestly sought. During the revolutionary years she repeatedly sacrificed a realistic analysis of the present to her belief in the possibility of an immediate transition to communism. This strong goal orientation, combined with her premise that change in attitudes could not wait for the building of the substructure, often led her into opposition. But her beliefs generated powerful motivation. "I love to look ahead," she is quoted as saying, "at the passing road of mankind that runs ahead to that magic, splendid future, where mankind will live, stretching his wings, saying, 'Happiness, happiness

for all.’”<sup>29</sup> Society would have become “a big, friendly family” which had solved all human problems to yield “heaven on earth.”<sup>30</sup>

Could anyone truly believe in the immediate realization of utopia, or are Kollontai’s grand phrases the stuff of which agitation is made? They seem to have been genuine, and the flowery prose in which she expressed them heartfelt. Her specific discussions of communist society speak very little to economic structures, beyond mentioning the need for heavy industry and scientific research.<sup>31</sup> Again, since her major interest lay in change in social organization and personality, she directed her attention to those problems.

Under communism, society would be a collective built on principles of “comradely solidarity,” the “consciousness of a community of interests,” and the “emotional and spiritual ties established between the members of a . . . collective.”<sup>32</sup> All individualism would die in the merger of the “wills and souls” of the participants (“Tezisy,” p. 32). “The single will is lost, disappears, in the collective effort,” Kollontai wrote (*Novaia moral’*, p. 32). Each person in the group linked to every other by “innumerable psychological and emotional bonds” would possess “delicacy, sensitivity, and the desire to be useful to another” (*La juventud*, pp. 29, 28). Precisely how the society would govern itself Kollontai did not specify, but she probably put her faith in innate human goodness. Private property would be gone, and with it classes and class oppression. Kollontai’s much-valued labor would cease to be a commodity to be bought and sold. Since work was the most important means of human self-definition, an individual no longer alienated from the product of his labor could no longer be alienated from himself. Under communism all people could live in “harmony” with their essential natures, and the root of discord would have died (*ibid.*, p. 50).

As usual, when she discussed her particular interests, Kollontai became more specific. She held as fundamental the premise that every member of society had a right to expect society to take care of him (*Rabotnitsa-mat’*, p. 30). All bourgeois institutions designed for that purpose, particularly the family, would be replaced by the collective. Kollontai never specified what would constitute a collective; presumably it would be composed of people who worked together. Domestic duties, from laundry and cooking to child-

29. Georgii Petrov, “Posol’ revoliutsii (A. M. Kollontai),” in *Zhenshchiny russkoi revoliutsii: Ocherki* (Moscow, 1968), p. 197.

30. *Rabotnitsa-mat’*, p. 20; Isabel de Palencia, *Alexandra Kollontai, Ambassadors from Russia* (New York, 1947), p. 142; Kollontai, *Communism and the Family* (London, [1918]), p. 22.

31. *Kto takie sotsial’-demokraty*, p. 6. Kendall E. Bailes notes that Kollontai seemed unconcerned about problems of “material production” after the abolition of private property. See Kendall E. Bailes, “Alexandra Kollontai et la nouvelle morale,” *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, 4 (October-December 1965): 477.

32. Kollontai, *La juventud comunista y la moral sexual* (Madrid, [1933]), p. 20.

rearing, would become public concerns in the dictatorship of the proletariat, enabling women to participate in society on a fully equal basis, with the exception that they would be protected from conditions hazardous to their child-bearing ability. Collectives would “mold” the children from birth, rearing all babies in common. This process would have the dual advantages of freeing women for activity beneficial to the entire collective and encouraging them to share their maternal instinct in concern for everyone’s progeny. “Why,” she said, “should this instinct be confined exclusively to narrow love and care for one’s own baby? Why not let this instinct, so precious for working humanity, branch out and rise to its highest level—that of caring about other children, equally helpless though not one’s own, and of devoting love and attention to other babies” (“Excerpts,” p. 55). Motherhood would be recognized as a social function, and a child would belong not to his parents but to the collective as a whole. In a passage which seems to deny the maternal instinct she elsewhere valued, Kollontai wrote: “Motherhood does not by any means necessarily consist in changing napkins, washing the baby, and being chained to the cradle. The social obligation of motherhood consists primarily in producing a healthy and fit-for-life child. To make this possible the working society must provide the most suitable conditions for pregnant women: while the woman herself must observe all the requirements of hygiene during the period of pregnancy, remembering that during these months she does not belong to herself, that she is working for the collective, that from her own flesh and blood she is ‘producing’ a new unit of labor, a new member of the Workers Republic. Her second obligation, from the point of view of the mother’s social task, is to feed the baby at her own breast. Only after having done this has the woman, as member of the working collective, the right to say that her social obligation toward the child is fulfilled. The remaining cares for the growing generation can be passed on to the collective” (pp. 54–55).

The unfortunate phrasing of such passages conjures up images of test-tube babies, dim, gray, sterile, and anonymous nurseries, and total social regimentation. If she ever had such fears, which is doubtful, Kollontai would have dismissed them, for her dream was not a 1984 nightmare. That result was inconceivable both because her dream took shape before the totalitarian nightmare came true and because her collectivist society would have replaced human evil with brotherhood and transformed the individualistic family into a family embracing all mankind. Although she seemed to dismiss parental love more casually than many women could, it was not love itself that she rejected but the institutional forms of bourgeois society.

Kollontai always believed human beings required love to be content (see, for example, *Novaya moral'*, p. 45). Like Marx, Engels, and Bebel she did not

advocate promiscuity after she rejected bourgeois marriage. Labeling physical gratification without love the “Wingless Eros,” Kollontai condemned it as “the brutal instinct of reproduction, the simple attraction of the sexes which is born and disappears with the same speed without creating emotional or spiritual ties” (*La juventud*, p. 5). The “Wingless Eros” sapped physical energy, blocked the development of “sensations of sympathy and psychological bonds between human beings,” and was based on female dependence on the male (p. 27). Once again, however, Kollontai’s views on a controversial issue are clouded by ambiguity, here in her attitude toward sexual intercourse. She seemed to contradict her condemnation of the “Wingless Eros” when she wrote: “The sex act should be recognized as an act neither shameful nor sinful, but natural and legitimate, like every other manifestation of a healthy organism, like the satisfying of hunger and thirst. In the phenomena of nature there is no morality or immorality. The satisfaction of a healthy and natural instinct only ceases to be normal when it crosses boundaries established by hygiene” (“Tezisy,” p. 31).

This passage harks back to Bebel’s attempt to eliminate value judgments from discussions of sex.<sup>33</sup> But Kollontai could not consistently hold that view, for she harbored the belief that sex without love was wrong in some ill-defined moral sense. Like her phrase “the brutal instinct of reproduction,” all of Kollontai’s writing was influenced by the complementary beliefs in the bestiality of sexual intercourse without love and the inferiority of the purely physical relative to the “spiritual.” Sex without love lacked the refinement of feeling proper to a communist. Kollontai developed these attitudes into a theory that sex began as an animal function of reproduction, then developed into an expression of complex, multifaceted emotions. With human growth under communism the “Wingless Eros” would die. “The greater the supply of spiritually and emotionally developed characteristics in men, the smaller will be the place for naked physicalness and the stronger the experience of love,” Kollontai wrote (“Tezisy,” p. 35). The collective would possess a new proletarian morality based on (1) male-female equality, (2) “mutual and reciprocal recognition” of one another’s rights without trying to possess each other, and (3) sensitivity to the needs of the other. A certain amount of bitterness crept in as Kollontai added, “Bourgeois civilization only requires that the woman possess this sensitivity in love” (*La juventud*, p. 31).

Such would be the “Winged Eros,” the new love. In the collective it would “occupy a place of honor as an emotion capable of enriching human happiness,” serving as a cement to hold the new society together by strengthening “the bonds of the spirit and the heart” (pp. 29, 25). Kollontai acknowledged

33. August Bebel, *Woman Under Socialism*, trans. Daniel De Leon (New York, 1904), pp. 79, 86.

as components of love sexual attraction ("passion"), friendship, "spiritual harmony," and the love of a cause, but the "Winged Eros" was neither friendship nor "spiritual harmony" alone. Although it contained them, it must also contain sexual desire (p. 27). Apparently Kollontai wanted the platonic emotions appropriate to love to exist between all members of the collective. With the addition of sexual attraction, the "Winged Eros" would be born. It would not be destructive of group harmony, because the spiritual love of each for all would remain unchanged.

Again, though Kollontai was not necessarily describing the lifelong union of a couple, neither was she advocating group marriage or promiscuity. Although she wrote that the collective should not regulate marriage except to protect its own health, and she believed that the stronger the collective the less "the need" to seek refuge from spiritual solitude in marriage, she was still thinking in terms of monogamy ("Tezisy," p. 34). She wrote, "Marriage is henceforth to be transformed into a sublime union of two souls in love with each other, each having faith in the other" (*Communism and the Family*, p. 19). This ideal marriage would be based on "a healthy instinct for reproduction," "infatuation," "passion," and "spiritual harmony," which would generate mutual respect, concern, and support; the "spiritual harmony" would include dedication to and participation in the realization of the "common creation," the further building of communism.<sup>34</sup> The bourgeois sexual mores within which she found herself entrapped would yield to equality.

In summary, a communist society would be a network of communal organizations of people who worked and lived together, unified by platonic and erotic love for one another and their cause. Kollontai saw it as attainable in her lifetime. Its achievement justified every sacrifice, for it would resolve all conflicts, including those in her own soul. The communist utopia played a central role in her ideology. In understanding its importance one begins to understand Kollontai's ideological search for emancipation. But how can one understand the function of this vision of a future fervently desired and earnestly sought? Following Georges Sorel, Gustave Le Bon, and J. F. Wolpert, one may approach it as a part of the revolutionary myth, whose rational content died in the fervor of the emotional, ideological zeal with which the ideas were impregnated. Utopia ceased to be an empirical formulation and became instead a goad to action, a sustainer in the battle, an interpreter of events, a sanctifier.<sup>35</sup> The myth is important not for the contours of its vision but for its power to bear the believer up. With Kollontai, whose dedication to the

34. Kollontai, . . . *Prostitutsiia i mery bor'by s nei* (Moscow, 1921), p. 22; *La juventud*, pp. 28, 32.

35. David E. Apter, "Ideology and Discontent," in Apter, *Ideology and Discontent*, p. 19; J. F. Wolpert, "Myth of Revolution," *Ethics*, 58 (1948): 249.

future played so strong a role in her motivation, the myth interpretation of her ideology's function seems valid.

Valid but not complete. For one may move beyond the myth and see the vision of utopia as a dream, and then, with Freud, unmask it to find the hidden wish behind the silent shout. If one looks at Kollontai's utopia as her dream, the one she dreamed for a lifetime, waking and sleeping, one sees in it the wishes of a lifetime—for an escape from isolation into a "family" (her word), for the finding within that family of the one or several, with whom she could have sexual love without sacrifice of self, for the death in that family of urban solitude and the thousand wrongs of a society too far from the Garden. As those social sins died, an end would come to the loneliness of a woman compelled to battle society and herself in her search for emancipation. Kollontai's ideology as a whole was a response to a world in which she felt confined. It explained the source of her anguish while promising a salvation whose inevitable coming she could hasten. Her dream was a lifelong wish for the destruction of the internal and external chains that bound her soul in bourgeois society.