As the preceding chapters demonstrate, the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Marxist tradition provides only limited theoretical guidance on the twin problems of women's oppression and women's liberation. Marked by omissions and inconsistencies, the classical literature fails to confront the issues in a systematic manner. Much of it rests, furthermore, on an inadequate grasp of Marx's theory of social development. Despite a general commitment to Marxism, commentaries tend also to vacillate among several different critiques of bourgeois society, notably, utopian socialism, crude materialism, and liberal feminism. In short, no stable Marxist theoretical framework has been established for the consideration of the question of women by socialists.

Given the disorderly state of this theoretical work, it is not surprising that certain patterns have gone unnoticed. As it turns out, two essentially contradictory approaches to the problem of women's subordination have always coexisted within the socialist tradition, although the distinction has not been explicitly recognized, nor the positions clearly differentiated from one another. An unspoken debate between two alternatives has therefore haunted efforts to address a variety of major theoretical and practical questions concerning women's oppression and liberation. The origins of this hidden debate go back to the works of Marx and Engels themselves, and it has taken concrete shape in the ambiguous theory and practice of later socialist and communist movements. The implicit controversy has recently reappeared, transformed in significant ways, within the contemporary women's movement.
Tangled within the socialist literature, then, lie two distinct views of women's situation, corresponding to divergent theoretical positions. For convenience, the two positions may be labeled according to their starting point for the analysis of women's oppression. On the one hand is the "dual systems perspective": women's oppression derives from their situation within an autonomous system of sex divisions of labor and male supremacy. On the other is the "social reproduction perspective": women's oppression has its roots in women's differential location within social reproduction as a whole. The following brief characterization of the two perspectives aims simply to suggest the theoretical underpinning and analytical consequences of each position. The social reproduction perspective is explored in more depth in the next chapters.

In essence, the dual systems perspective takes off from what appears to be obvious: divisions of labor and authority according to sex, the oppression of women, and the family. These phenomena are treated more or less as givens, analytically separable, at least in part, from the social relations in which they are embedded. The major analytical task is to examine the origin and development of the empirical correlation between sex divisions of labor and the social oppression of women. In general, it is women's involvement in the sex division of labor, and their direct relationship—of dependence and of struggle—to men, rather than their insertion in overall social reproduction, that establishes their oppression. At the same time, women's oppression and the sex division of labor are seen to be tied to the mode of production dominant in a given society, and to vary according to class. These latter factors enter the investigation as important variables which are, however, essentially external to the workings of women's oppression.

Class and sex oppression therefore appear to be autonomous phenomena from the dual systems perspective. Despite its assertions of an "inextricable relationship" between sex and class, this perspective leaves the character of that relationship unspecified. Logically speaking, however, the dual systems perspective implies that women's oppression follows a course that is essentially independent from that of class oppression. And it suggests, furthermore, that some systematic mechanism, peculiar to the sex division of labor and distinct from the class struggle characterizing a given mode of production, constitutes the main force behind women's oppression. In other words, according to the theory implicit in the dual systems perspective, two powerful motors drive the development of history: the class struggle and the sex struggle.
While the dual systems perspective begins with empirically given phenomena whose correlations are interpreted by means of a chain of plausible inferences, the social reproduction perspective starts out from a theoretical position—namely, that class struggle over the conditions of production represents the central dynamic of social development in societies characterized by exploitation. In these societies, surplus labor is appropriated by a dominant class, and an essential condition for production is the constant presence and renewal of a subordinated class of direct producers committed to the labor process. Ordinarily, generational replacement provides most of the new workers needed to replenish this class, and women’s capacity to bear children therefore plays a critical role in class society.

From the point of view of social reproduction, women’s oppression in class societies is rooted in their differential position with respect to generational replacement processes. Families constitute the historically specific social form through which generational replacement usually takes place. In class societies, “one cannot speak at all of the family ‘as such,’” as Marx once put it, for families have widely varying places within the social structure. In propertied classes, families usually act as the carrier and transmitter of property, although they may also have other roles. Here, women’s oppression flows from their role in the maintenance and inheritance of property. In subordinate classes, families usually structure the site at which direct producers are maintained and reproduced; such families may also participate directly in immediate production. Female oppression in these classes derives from women’s involvement in processes that renew direct producers, as well as their involvement in production. While women’s oppression in class societies is experienced at many levels, it rests, ultimately, on these material foundations. The specific working out of this oppression is a subject for historical, not theoretical, investigation.

Presented in crystallized form, the distinction between the dual systems and the social reproduction perspectives is relatively clear. Of the two the social reproduction perspective accords most closely with Marx’s analysis of the workings of the capitalist mode of production, particularly as elaborated in Capital. The demarcation between the two perspectives has always been blurred, however, even while the presence of contradictory positions underlies much of the ambiguity marking the theoretical work produced by the socialist movement. The dual systems perspective has generally prevailed over the social reproduction perspective, despite periodic efforts to derive an analysis of the question of women from Marx’s work.
Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, for example, relies heavily on the dual systems perspective. In the first place, the perspective is built into the very organization of the book. By assigning a separate chapter to the family, Engels implicitly suggests that the category of family—whose general shaping by the sex division of labor he takes as a given—can be considered virtually autonomously. Moreover, he regards the sex division of labor as biologically based and historically inflexible, whereas all other major phenomena in the *Origin* have a social foundation. In this way, Engels awards a central role to the sex division of labor in the family, but places it in a theoretical limbo. Similarly, women’s oppression seems to spring from the independent nature of the sex division of labor itself. The remarks in the preface concerning the twofold character of production make these dualities explicit. The dual systems perspective takes the general form, in the *Origin*, of an emphasis on the sex division of labor and on the family as critically important phenomena which are not, however, firmly located with respect to overall social reproduction.

The *Origin*’s characterization of the single family as the “economic unit of society,” with the additional implication that “modern society is a mass composed of these individual families as molecules,” further illustrates its implicit dependence on the dual systems perspective. In such statements, Engels retains the separation of family from social reproduction, but peculiarly assigns a dominant constitutive role to the former. The manner in which the family unit functions within social reproduction, other than, in the case of the ruling class, to hold property, is never clearly defined. Along the same lines, Marx, as well as Engels, spoke several times of the sex division of labor in the family as a sort of representative miniature of the social division of labor in society. “The modern family contains in germ not only slavery (*servitus*) but also serfdom, since from the beginning it is related to agricultural services. It contains *in miniature* all the contradictions which later extend throughout society and its state.” Engels also uses the image to describe relations between the sexes. “Within the family, [the husband] is the bourgeois, and the wife represents the proletariat.” Since neither Marx nor Engels ever specifies, in any precise manner, the nature of this “representation”—that is, the relationship between the family “germ” and the social whole—these images function as simplistic parallels. At best, they are dangerous metaphors; at worst, uncritical borrowings from early bourgeois political philosophy.

Finally, the *Origin*’s discussion of the family as the site of a struggle between the sexes accords with the dual systems perspective. While Engels underscores the simultaneous emergence of sex and class con-
flict, he never achieves a clear picture of their connection. The two developments remain historically parallel phenomena, whose theoretical relationship is best characterized as one of autonomy. For the propertied family, women’s oppression has its source in the husband’s need to preserve and transmit his private property. Obviously, the absence of private property should be accompanied by an absence of sex conflict. In fact, as Engels is forced to acknowledge, women occupy a subordinate place in propertyless households. Engels offers no theoretical basis for this historic oppression, although the preface’s concept of systematic “production of human beings themselves” hints obliquely at a distinct mechanism.

The *Origin* does not entirely neglect the social reproduction perspective. It is implicit when Engels states that participation in public production offers the path to emancipation for the proletarian woman, when he insists that domestic work must be converted into a public industry, or when he argues that the single family must cease to be the economic unit of society. These assertions function as important insights which need, however, to be supported theoretically. Why does participation in public production offer a precondition for social equality? What does it mean to say the family’s aspect as an economic unit must be abolished? In what sense is the family an economic unit? How are these issues linked to the requirement that domestic work be converted into a public industry? Unfortunately, Engels never manages to provide the explicit theoretical underpinning necessary to answer these questions properly. Marx had presented the outlines of a theory of the reproduction of labor power and the working class that could, in principle at least, have constituted the starting point. But such a serious extension of Marx’s work represented an undertaking for which Engels lacked time and, perhaps, motivation. With the publication of the *Origin*, Engels’s contradictory blend of the dual systems and social reproduction perspectives became, in effect, the unstable theoretical foundation for all subsequent socialist investigation of the so-called woman question.

The unrecognized gap between the two perspectives widened as the struggle between Marxism and revisionism intensified in the Second International. Whereas Engels had managed to combine both perspectives, however awkwardly, in a single text, subsequent analyses tended more clearly to emphasize one at the expense of the other. In general, the dual systems perspective dominated within the reformist wing of the socialist movement, while a rough version of the social reproduction perspective underlay the occasional efforts by opponents of reformism to address the question of women.
Behind the mass of data in August Bebel’s *Woman and Socialism*, for instance, is a conceptual framework thoroughly in accord with the dual systems perspective. The book’s position within the terms of the dual systems perspective is established, first of all, by Bebel’s assumption that the category “woman” represents an appropriate theoretical starting point. Despite ritual assertions that the “solution of the Woman Question coincides completely with the solution of the Social Question,” Bebel treats the phenomenon of women’s oppression as analytically separable from social development as a whole. He argues, furthermore, that women’s individual dependence on men is the source of their oppression in class society, but fails to situate that dependence within overall social reproduction. In short, Bebel’s *Woman and Socialism* puts the sex division of labor and the relationship of dependence between women and men, taken as empirically obvious and ahistorical givens (at least until the advent of socialist society), at the heart of the problem of women’s oppression.

Next to the theoretical and political confusion that permeates *Woman and Socialism*, Engels’s analysis in the *Origin* has considerable force and clarity. Rather than zigzagging erratically between the so-called woman and social questions, he concentrates on the social phenomena that produce woman’s position in a given society, and on the conditions that might lead to changes in that position. He does his best, that is, to delineate the relationships among the factors involved in women’s oppression—the family, sex divisions of labor, property relations, class society, and the state—at times hinting also at the more comprehensive concept of the reproduction of labor power implicit in the social reproduction perspective. Although Engels’s discussion in the *Origin* sorely lacks the powerful theoretical and political insight that Marx might have brought to the subject, it moves well beyond Bebel’s effort in *Woman and Socialism*.

The Avelings’ pamphlet *The Woman Question* confirms, even more clearly than Bebel’s *Woman and Socialism*, the dominance of the dual systems perspective within the socialist movement. Like Bebel, the authors assert that the basis of women’s oppression is economic dependence, but they fail to explain how, thus effectively severing the problem of women’s subordination from its location within social development. The pamphlet’s conceptualization of woman’s position mainly in terms of love, sexuality, marriage, divorce, and dependence on men, reinforces this theoretical demarcation between women, the family, and the sex division of labor, on the one hand, and social reproduction, on the other. Finally, the pamphlet’s explicit formulation of sex and class oppression as parallel phenomena, engendering parallel
struggles whose relationship is never discussed, reveals most sharply its reliance on the dual systems perspective.

At the theoretical level, the growing strength of reformism in the Second International undoubtedly found a reflection in the consolidation of the dual systems perspective as the unspoken basis for any socialist efforts to address the question of women. Against this position, the left wing of the socialist movement presented an implicit, if all too undeveloped, challenge, which accorded with the general premises of the social reproduction perspective. Thus, in their approach to the issue of women's subordination, Clara Zetkin and Lenin, both leaders in the struggle against reformism, reject the universal categories of "woman" or "the family" as theoretical starting points. Instead, each focuses on the specificity of women's oppression in different classes in a given mode of production.

In her 1896 speech to the party congress, for example, Zetkin insists on the class-dependent character of the so-called woman question in capitalist societies. She identifies three distinct woman questions, all demanding resolution, but differentiated by the source of oppression, the nature of the demands for equality, and the obstacles to achieving the demands. Refusing to consider the woman question as a classless abstraction to be resolved in the future, she suggests a comprehensive program of organizational activity. At the practical level, Zetkin's opposition to reformism took the form of a commitment to developing socialist work among women of all classes—work that would support reforms without falling into reformism, and simultaneously keep the revolutionary goal firmly in view. In contrast to many of her contemporaries in the socialist movement, she saw the fight for changes in the relations between women and men as a task for the present, not for some indefinite socialist future.

With more theoretical precision than Zetkin, if less originality and commitment, Lenin places the issue of women's subordination in the context of the reproduction of labor power in class society. His repeated emphasis on the decisive role of domestic labor reflects an understanding, heightened by the experience of the Bolshevik revolution, of the material foundation of women's oppression. His grasp of the workings of capitalist social reproduction enables him to sketch the outlines of a theoretically coherent relationship between sex and class oppression, by means of the concept of democratic rights. These positions constitute the theoretical basis underlying Lenin's strategic clarity—never sufficiently implemented by the Bolsheviks in practice—on the importance of special work among women, on the need for mass women's organizations bringing together women of all classes,
and on the problem of combating male ideological backwardness. Taken together, Zetkin's and Lenin's observations on women offer the rudiments of a specific use of the social reproduction perspective to analyze women's oppression in capitalist society.

In the context of the modern women's movement in North America and Western Europe, specifically its socialist-feminist wing, the tension between the two perspectives has taken a new form. Whereas the socialist movement of the late nineteenth century sought mainly to differentiate its positions on the problem of women's oppression from those of liberal feminism, contemporary socialist feminism has developed as much in sympathetic response to the views of radical feminism as to the failures of both liberal feminism and the socialist tradition. It is this advanced position, in part, that has enabled the socialist-feminist movement to make its many significant contributions.

In certain ways, theoretical work produced from within the socialist-feminist framework recreates the major characteristics of the dual systems perspective. For example, socialist-feminist theorists tend, no matter what their stated intentions, to separate the question of divisions of labor and authority according to sex from social reproduction. Furthermore, they remain generally unable to situate women's oppression theoretically in terms of mode of production and class. And they offer a one-sided emphasis on the family and issues of sexuality and personal dependence. Last, socialist feminists have not provided theoretical underpinning for their strategic emphasis on the integral role, in the struggle for socialism, of the autonomous organization of women from all sectors of society. In these ways, socialist feminists often reproduce the weaknesses of the dual systems perspective, but their work also points the way toward a more adequate theoretical grasp of the issue of women's oppression. In particular, they insist on the centrality of achieving a materialist understanding of woman's situation within the family—as childbearer, child rearer, and domestic laborer—as the key to the problem of the persistence of women's oppression across different modes of production and classes. It is here that socialist-feminist theorists have made especially important contributions. Those who focus on the task in terms of Marx's theory of social reproduction have renewed, furthermore, the elements of the social reproduction perspective, and have deepened it in ways never achieved either by Marx or by the socialist tradition. In sum, the political seriousness of socialist-feminist involvement in theoretical work, fueled by the continuing militancy of women in social movements around the world has both reproduced and transformed the tension between the two perspectives. On the one hand, socialist femi-
A Dual Legacy

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ivism revives the contradictory coexistence of the two theoretical perspectives, which originated with Marx and Engels, only to disappear under the pressures of revisionism. On the other, it moves well beyond limitations established in the earlier period.

Socialist-feminist theory unknowingly recapitulates, then, certain failures of the classical socialist tradition, while also laying the basis to correct them. Like much of the socialist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it has, willy-nilly, adopted some positions that are essentially at odds with its commitment to Marxism and social revolution. Unlike that movement, however, it has not closed itself off to a revolutionary perspective, and therefore has every interest in transcending the contradiction.