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Feminist history

# A New Generation of Radicals Is Rediscovering Alexandra Kollontai

- Features - Feminism -

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**The Bolshevik diplomat and Marxist feminist thinker Alexandra Kollontai, whose pioneering writings explored the prospects for women’s emancipation under socialism, was born on 31 March 1872.**

I met Dora García, a Spanish artist who has spent several years exploring the life and work of Alexandra Kollontai, in late February at a Brooklyn art space called Amant, where her work on the Bolshevik thinker was on display, including an exhibition and two new films. Amant’s space, in the Bushwick neighborhood, is inviting, with a large outdoor garden featuring a large statue of a nude and exuberant woman. The name of the art space suits our subject; Kollontai wrote extensively on how communism could free women for better love, sex, romance, and comradeship.

Before I met García, I perused her exhibition, which explores Kollontai’s publishing history — through letters and various editions of her books — juxtaposed with photos and placards documenting left-feminist protest. I chatted briefly with Amant’s director and chief curator, Ruth Estévez, who told me, with some surprise, that this is the first time García has been exhibited in the United States. “She is such an important artist in Europe but not here,” Estévez emphasized attributing the difference to “perhaps the themes!”

Estévez is almost certainly right that the themes of García’s work — especially on Alexandra Kollontai — aren’t an obvious fit for the US art world, which has only sporadically discovered protest politics. The milieu has yet to embrace communism and is mostly bankrolled by millionaires and billionaires who wouldn’t take kindly to the idea.

Kollontai dreamed of a world in which women and men would be comrades in building communism, a system that would have gender equality at its heart, with the work of the household fully socialized and extensive support for mothers, allowing them to embrace the joys of parenthood without being deprived of full participation in the workforce. Today, Kollontai’s largely unrealized ideals of working-class women’s liberation seem more relevant than ever, with legal abortion imperiled (and access already severely limited in the United States), the public infrastructure for care work under constant assault from austerity politics, far too many women workers confronting low-wages and poor working conditions, and the conditions of love and sex still hobbled by the capitalist marketplace.

Given these conditions, plus the resurgence of socialist and feminist organizing and thinking around the world, it makes sense that many are now revisiting Kollontai. Her ideas have inspired and informed recent left-feminist books, including Kristen Ghodsee’s *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence* (Bold Type, 2018) and Jodi Dean’s *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging* (Verso, 2019), and are widely discussed in socialist feminist reading groups.

Dora García has played a leading role in this current Kollontai revival. The communist writer and diplomat’s work and life was the subject of García’s exhibition *Red Love* at an art space in suburban Stockholm in 2018, which was followed by an anthology of the same title reflecting on the communist thinker’s legacy. Garcia said she was invited to be part of the Swedish project because her previous work had focused on Hannah Arendt. “Because,” she laughed, jokingly speaking in the voice of an Amazon algorithm, “if you like Hannah Arendt, maybe you will like Alexandra Kollontai!”

After a year immersed in Kollontai, García said, “I thought, we have just barely scraped the surface.” She continued her research, and the current work is the result. In addition to the exhibition, titled *Revolution: Fill Your Promise!*, García’s current work on Kollontai includes a film called *Love With Obstacles*, which takes us into Kollontai’s archives

in Russia.

A second film, *If I Could Wish for Something*, uses an artifact from Kollontai's time in Mexico as a jumping-off point to explore contemporary feminist and queer protest and artistic expression in that country. Kollontai's relationship to Mexico, where she was the Soviet ambassador, is rich terrain for García. Joseph Stalin sent her there with an explicit mandate to form economic relationships and spread Soviet culture, but not to organize politically or meet with communists. (Stalin wanted her to form a strong relationship with Mexico without antagonizing the United States.) "Of course," García deadpanned, "she did meet communists."

One paradox of Kollontai's role in Mexico was that Soviet "culture" was inherently political. "She was supposed to sell films because that was something the Soviet Union was exporting," García explained by way of example. "Of course, the Soviet films are excellent films, but they are also propaganda films." Kollontai leaned into the ambiguity of her mission, bringing Sergei Eisenstein to Mexico, García explained, "first the films and then the person."

While some have speculated that Stalin was trying to kill Kollontai by sending her to Mexico —the hot climate exacerbated her health problems — García thinks that their relationship, and Kollontai's mission in Mexico, was more nuanced. "If he wanted to kill her," García observed bluntly, "there were simpler ways."

The exhibition explores Kollontai's publishing history. At that time, writers didn't have any control over translations nor over how their books were presented. To move more product, the Mexican publisher renamed one of Kollontai's books *Red Love* and packaged it as "sort of soft porn," García explained. "And of course they emptied it of every revolutionary message and concentrated on the fact that it was relatively outspoken about sex." In her exhibition at *Amant*, García displayed Kollontai's indignant letter to the publisher about these liberties.

Another of García's observations on Kollontai's publishing history, she said, is that it always "coincides with different waves of feminism: 1930s, then nothing, then the '60s/'70s, '90s, and now again." One surprise for me, perusing the exhibit, was a 1971 edition of Kollontai's *Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman* with a foreword by Germaine Greer, the international second-wave feminist celebrity and author of *The Female Eunuch*. (Greer has unfortunately turned hard-right on trans issues in recent decades.) In the Latin American context, revivals of Kollontai have coincided with an emphasis on class, García said, "which had been absent from white feminism . . . [bourgeois] feminism had ignored proletarian women as" – and as well as – "women of color."

García's film *Love with Obstacles* explores contradictions in Kollontai's life. As the only woman in the first Bolshevik government, she was responsible for significant reforms: legal abortion, maternity support and protection, equal pay for men and women, contraception, and improved access to education for women. Most of these achievements were eroded under Stalin. Yet as committed as she was to the liberation of women, Kollontai was incredibly loyal to the project of Soviet communism. Stalin made abortion illegal again, for example, and García explores documentary evidence of Kollontai's conflicted reaction to this in the film. García said of Kollontai's willingness to defend a policy she didn't support: "As much as she might disagree with that, she would never turn her back to the party. She had this notion of being a soldier."

In Kollontai's work, García finds relevance to today's movements. The idea "that there is no revolution without sexual revolution," she said, "reverberates in things that are being said now" about the family, gender, and why sex is bad under capitalism. Equally contemporary, García said, is Kollontai's refusal to join forces with what she called "bourgeois feminism," what we would call liberal feminism. In 1905, she wrote that working women shouldn't listen to the "mermaid singing" of the bourgeois feminists, because what they want is to have access to the same privileges as their husbands, but they are not going to reject their class privileges.

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Instead, she argued, working-class women should “join forces with your male comrades because only in a socialist society will women be liberated.”

[Jacobin](#)

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