

M – M – M¹
by [Goldman Club](#)



I.

Maxim Gorky wrote Mother following the failure of the first Russian revolution in 1905. It was intended to counter a mood of defeat. Written while he was visiting New York in 1906, the novel was first published in English for an American readership. Gorky believed revolution was possible in America. As he declared in a letter written in New York that same year, “Socialism should first be realized here—that is the first thing you think of when you see the amazing houses, machines, etc.”

The plot, loosely based on the 1902 Sormovo May Day demonstration, focuses on the revolutionary energy leading up to 1905. The story is centered around a working-class mother who becomes radicalized through her son’s revolutionary activity. Beaten by her alcoholic husband (who dies) and worried about her son (who is imprisoned) she is a character whose narrative development is forged between social and anti-social reproduction, which is to say, revolt and care

MOTHER 1: Pizza! Hot pizza!

MOTHER 2: And the box is the best part.

MOTHER 1: Pizza pie!

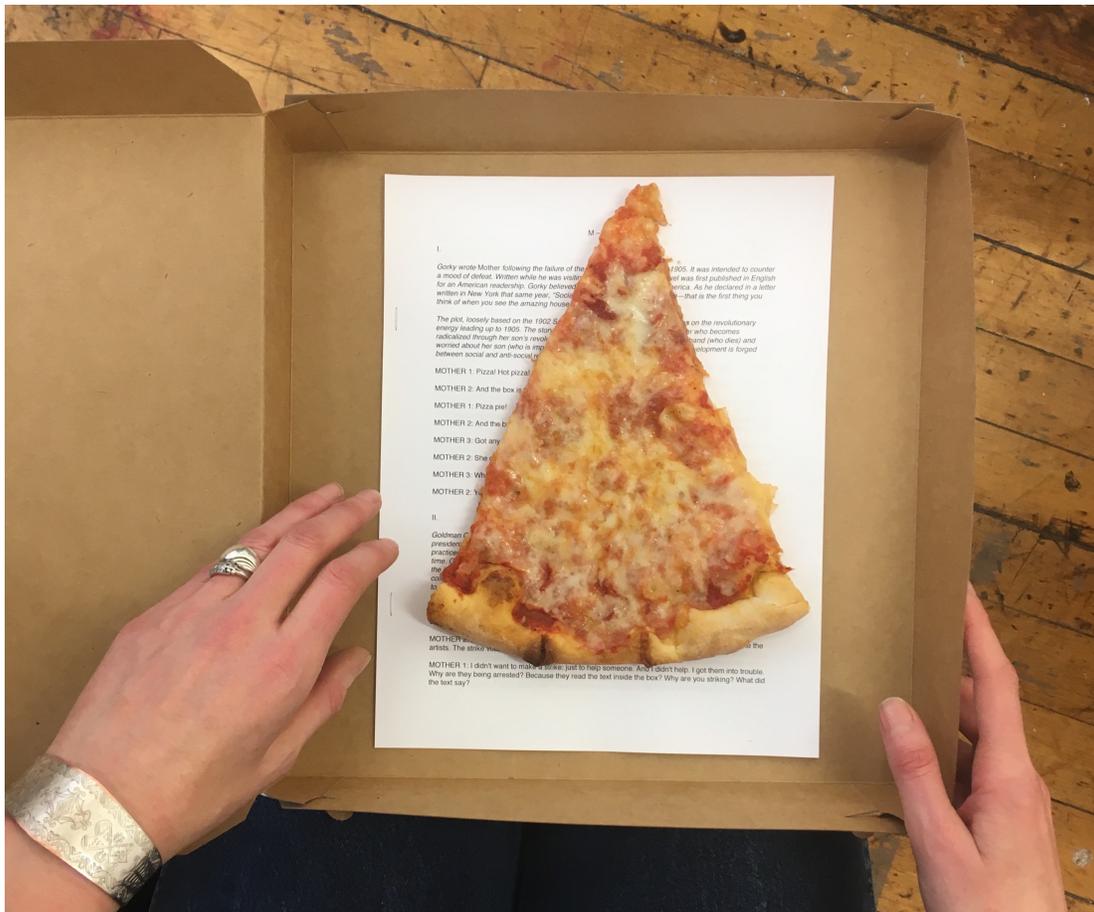
MOTHER 2: And the box is free.

MOTHER 3: Got any cheese slices?

MOTHER 2: She does! And the box mustn’t be thrown away.

MOTHER 3: What’s so special about the box?

MOTHER 2: You’re holding one. Read it.



II.

Goldman Club was also born of a moment of political despair. Begun in the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential elections, our collaboration developed out of a shared sense of urgency to rethink our practices and develop ways of responding to the recent neo-fascistic and authoritarian tendencies of our time. Goldman Club takes its name from the Marxist and anti-fascist John Reed Clubs of the 1920-30s, the investment bank Goldman Sachs, and the anarchist writer and activist Emma Goldman. The collaboration offers us a provisional way of working together that slips the trap of self-expression in order to attend to the larger tectonics of power and property. It is a temporary measure, emerging in the disproportionate gap between what we are capable of and what is needed.

MOTHER 1: Today I distributed the pizza boxes you gave me. And I saw someone being arrested just because they had read one. What is it you've got me to do?

MOTHER 2: It wasn't you that put them in prison. Far as we know it was the police. You helped unite the artists. The vote was almost a hundred percent.

MOTHER 1: I didn't want to make trouble; just to help someone. And I didn't help. I got them into trouble. Why are they being arrested? Because they read the text inside the box? Why are you protesting? What did the text say?

MOTHER 2: What do you think it said?

MOTHER 1: Something wrong.

MOTHER 2: The text said that the artists shouldn't allow the gallery owners or cops or curators to do just as they please—ACAB.

MOTHER 1: What nonsense, how are you to stop them? Why shouldn't the gallery owner do just as he pleases? Does his gallery belong to him, or doesn't it?

MOTHER 2: It belongs to him.

MOTHER 1: Right. This table, for instance, belongs to me. Let me ask you: can I do whatever I want with it?

MOTHER 2: Yes, you can do whatever you want with this table.

MOTHER 1: Right. For instance, can I smash it into little pieces if I want?

MOTHER 2: Yes, you can smash this table into little pieces if you want.

MOTHER 1: Aha. Well, the gallery owner's gallery belongs to him like my table does to me, so can he do with it whatever he wants?

MOTHER 2: No.

MOTHER 1: Why not?

MOTHER 2: Because for his shows, performances, and openings, he needs us artists.

MOTHER 1: And suppose he says he doesn't need you any longer?

MOTHER 2: You see, Mother, you have to look at it like this: at one moment he may need us, and at another not. When he needs us, we have to be there, and when he doesn't need us, we're there just the same. Where else can we go? And he knows that. He doesn't always need us, but we always need him. And he takes advantage of it. The gallery owner has his space. And that space is what makes our work possible—it is the context for our work. We haven't any other. We make the work, but it only becomes "art" when it enters the gallery. His gallery belongs to him, but if he decides to only show painters or turn it into a pop-up shop, then he is taking our work away from us.

MOTHER 1: Because the gallery belongs to him the same way my table belongs to me.

MOTHER 2: Right, but do you think it's right that he owns the space and context for our work?

MOTHER 1: No! But whether or not I think it's right, it belongs to him just the same. And somebody might think it's not right for my table to belong to me.

MOTHER 2: You see, that's where we'd say: it's not the same thing for a table to belong to you as for a gallery. Of course a table can belong to you, or a chair for that matter. It harms nobody. If you store it in your home, what harm can that do? But if a gallery or museum belongs to you, you can harm several hundred artists. Because the space and context for their work is in your possession, and this gives you the power to exploit them.

MOTHER 1: Right, so he can exploit us. Don't act as if I wouldn't have realized that after thirty years' experience with galleries and curators. There's just one thing I didn't realize—something could have been done to stop it.

MOTHER 2: So now we agree, Mother, with respect to the gallery owner, that his space is property in a quite different sense from, let's say, your table. He can use his property to exploit us. But there's more. Suppose I go up to the gallery owner and say, "without me your gallery is just empty space," then the gallery owner will laugh himself silly and chuck me out. But suppose all of us stand there saying the same thing, then the owner and the curators won't laugh any longer.

MOTHER 1: And that is your strike?

MOTHER 2: Yes, that's our strike.

MOTHER 1: And that's what the pizza box said?

MOTHER 2: Yes, that's what the pizza box said.

III.

We in Goldman Club are not mothers. But we have been thinking about the mother in our contemporary moment as a figure for a revolutionary imagination when political realities feel exhausted. We have turned to Mother to imagine from a state of impasse, to conceive a future through the past. In this exercise, we are neither passive spectators nor a truly agential actors, but enter a slippery dialectic of acting and becoming within a given set of social and aesthetic conditions.

What is not clear from Gorky's narrative and remains a subject of debate within Goldman Club is whether the mother becomes radicalized within the domestic sphere, recognizing the pain and care of reproductive labor to be part and parcel of exploitative labor conditions more broadly. Or whether she transcends the domestic sphere of reproduction, trespassing on production in order to disrupt it, and takes up the flag in the revolution.

MOTHER 1: Our flag was borne by a woman in her sixties. We said: 'Isn't that flag much too heavy for you? Give us the flag!' But she said:

MOTHER 2: No, when I feel tired I'll give it to you, dear, and then you can carry it.

MOTHER 3: So that is how she marched with us, tirelessly, from morning till past midday.

In Gorky's Mother, the Oedipal family drama between the Father/Mother/Son triad is transposed onto a revolutionary narrative. The Father dies. The Son goes to jail. And the Mother emerges as the agent of the cause: from strike to revolution.

MOTHER 1: All my past is pain.

MOTHER 2: My husband beat me a lot; and everything that was before him is effaced from my soul.

MOTHER 1: This gives me a special relationship to change.

MOTHER 2: Agitation disturbed the settled, dark life of the people in slow but wide circles. Dormant thoughts awoke, and men were shaken from their usual forced calm attitude toward daily events. All this I saw more clearly than others, because I, better than they, knew the dismal, dead face of existence; I

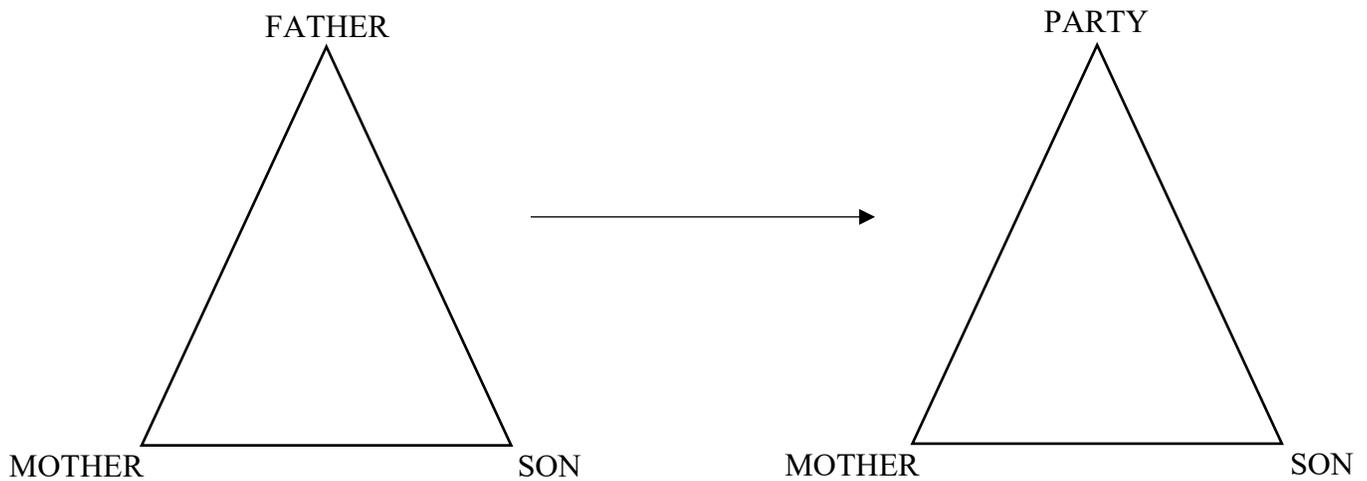
stand nearer to it, and now see upon it the wrinkles of hesitation and turmoil, the vague hunger for the new.

MOTHER 1: I give and receive.

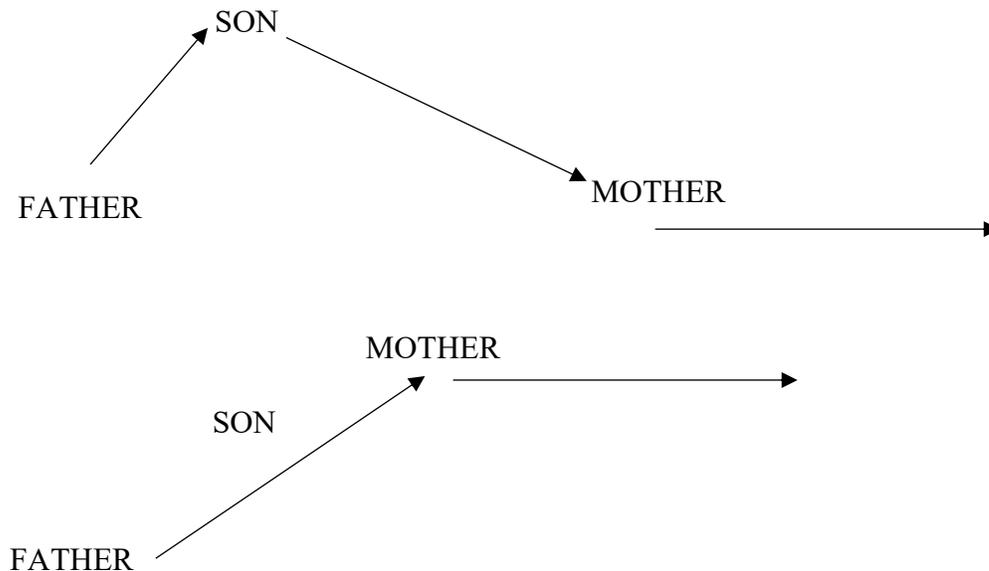
MOTHER 2: Receive it with an open heart, feed on it; it will give you power to understand everything, to fight against everything for the truth, for the freedom from mankind. Receive it, believe it, go with it toward the happiness of all the people, to a new life with great joy!

MOTHER 1: I received a blow on the chest; I staggered and fell on the bench.

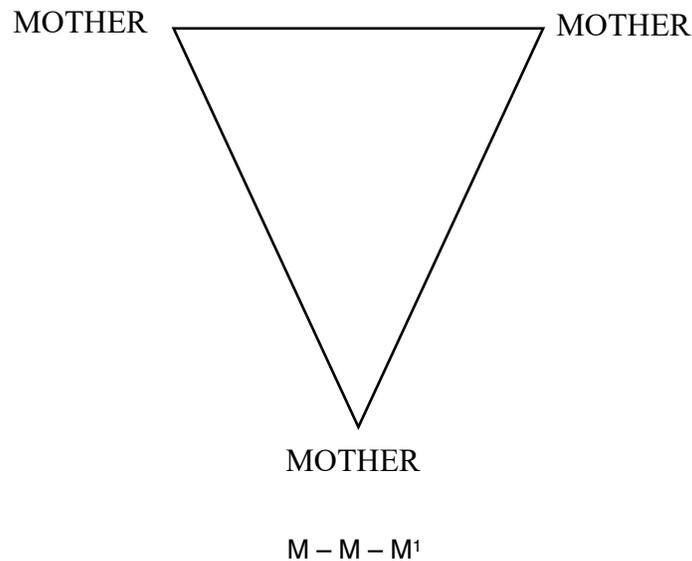
The Oedipal triangle breaks open to make possible other provisional forms of collectivity: no longer the family, but the party: M – M – M'



The triangle ruptures to form the revolutionary vector. The stable triad becomes dynamic, a triangulating action over time.



The triangle is the stable form, the psychoanalytic family form, the female pubis. At the same it signifies a change in value, an invaginating aperture through which difference enters and through which it is borne.



IV.

Gorky's Mother was not only an inspiration for a 1931 Brecht play, but for three filmic adaptations: Vsevolod Pudovkin's 1926, a constructivist interpretation following the 1917 revolution; Mark Donskoy's 1955 Soviet drama, released two years after Joseph Stalin's death; and Gleb Panfilov's 1989 epic made on the eve of perestroika. In all of these instances, the novel is transformed into a script, something to be acted out. At first we had the idea to turn Mother into yet another theatrical script to act out, but then thought perhaps it makes for a better playworld than a play.

A playworld is a tool used in early childhood education. Children develop imagination through play and by internalizing signs and symbolic meanings attached to material objects. A playworld is created between children and adults, often using a text and an object representing a "portal". The portal is a text turned into a material space. In this world, the children are the experts—adults follow them through the portal. But we are not children, and a playworld without children is just world. In this world we learn from Mother.

MOTHER 1: So you want to learn how to read, do you? I can't think what use it would be to you in your position, you're a bit old to start now. But I'll do my best. All got something to write with? These are three simple words: "Hat, Dog, Fish". I'll say them again: "Hat, Dog, Fish".

MOTHER 2: What's the point of words like that?

MOTHER 3: Does it really have to be "Hat, Dog, Fish"? We are old and haven't got all that long to learn the words we need.

MOTHER 1: It doesn't matter what words you learn from.

MOTHER 3: Why not? How do you write "Mother" for instance? That would interest all of us.

MOTHER 1: Right but you have to start with simplest, not the hardest. "Hat" is simple.

MOTHER 2: "Class War" is a lot simpler.

MOTHER 1: There's no such thing as Class War. Let's be clear about that.

MOTHER 2: I can't learn anything from you if you think there's no Class War.

MOTHER 3 You're here to learn how to read and write, and you can do that here. Reading is Class War!

MOTHER 1: That's a lot of rubbish. "Reading is Class War" – what on earth does that mean? What's the point of such talk? So here's "Mother." Copy it down.

MOTHER 3 "Reading is Class War" means: once we can read and write we'll be able to write our own pamphlets and read our books. Then we can direct the Class War.

MOTHER 1: Let me tell you people something. I'm a mother, and for twelve years now I've taught reading and writing, but I have to admit: I know in my heart that is all rubbish. Books, they just make mankind worse. Take an innocent child, he's a better person because he's not yet been spoiled by civilization.

MOTHER 3: So how do you write "Class War"? Mother, you must keep your hand steady, or it will shake so your writing's not clear.

MOTHER 1: You must write in straight line and not go beyond the margin. Those who don't respect the margin don't respect the law. Generations after generation has amassed piles of knowledge and written piles of books. And we have never progressed so far technically. But what has it done for us? We have never seen such confusion. The whole box of tricks should be chucked into the depths of the river, all those books and machines into the Hudson. Defend yourselves against knowledge! Finished yet? Sometimes I get completely downed in melancholia. What, I ask myself, can such truly great thoughts – thoughts that encompass not just the Now but the always and the eternal, the Human Condition in its essence – what can they have to do with "Class War"?

MOTHER 2: Thoughts like that are of no use. As you drown you're exploiting us.

MOTHER 3 Shut up, Mother. Please how do you spell "Exploitation"?

MOTHER 1: "Exploitation," that's another word only found in books. Fancy me ever having exploited anyone!

MOTHER 2: You only say that because you get none of the profits.

MOTHER 3: The W in "Class War" is exactly the same as the "M" in "Mother" but upside down.

MOTHER 1: Knowledge doesn't help. Knowledge doesn't help. Goodness helps.

MOTHER 3: If you don't need your knowledge then just let us have it!

V.

While Gorky was visiting the US, he got caught in his own domestic scandal. Though not yet officially divorced from his first wife, Ekaterina Pavlovna Peshkova, he travelled to New York with his lover, Maria Fyodorovna Andreyeva. The two were kicked out of the Hotel Belleclaire on April 14th, 1906 when it was discovered that she was his mistress. As a result of the “sex scandal,” many of Gorky’s American allies withdrew their support, including President Theodor Roosevelt who had invited him to the White House. Yet one contingent was not swayed. As the San Francisco Chronicle reported, “Women Make a Hero of Gorky”: after delivering an address to 2000 people at New York’s Labor Lyceum, the over 500 women bruised themselves in the crush to shake hands with the “polygamous writer.”

MOTHER 1: Watching my mother with the mother it was suddenly so clear.

MOTHER 2: What was?

MOTHER 1: That the mother would never stop, it would never leave her. And it would never hurt her. Never shout at her or get drunk and hit her. Or say it was too busy to spend time with her. It would always be there. And it would die to protect her. Of all the would-be mothers who came and went over the years, this mother was the only thing who measured up. In an insane world, revolution was the sanest choice.

Gorky Reflected on New York in an article called “City of Mammon”: “From afar the city looks like a huge jaw with black, uneven teeth. It belches forth clouds of smoke into the sky [...]. When you enter it you feel that you have fallen into a stomach of brick and iron which swallows up millions of people, and churns, grinds, and digests them. The streets seem like so many hungry throats, through which pass, into some unseen depth, pieces of food—living human beings. Everywhere, over your head, under your feet, and at your sides is iron, living iron emitting horrible noises. Called to life by the power of gold, inspirited by it, it envelops man in its cobweb, deafening him, sucking his life blood, deadening his mind.”

MOTHER 2: People keep telling you how a mother is soon lost to her mother.

MOTHER: Did you lose yours?

MOTHER 2: No, not me: I kept in touch with mine. Do you want to know how?

MOTHER 1: Ok

MOTHER 2: Through The third thing. She and I lived as two, but a third thing was shared by us both; we pursued it in common. It brought us together.

MOTHER 1: A third thing?

MOTHER 2: Yes, often I have listened to mothers when they spoke with their mothers. What a contrast it was when we two spoke, talking about the third thing that was common to us: that tremendous cause that is shared by so many.

