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Marxist and Socialist Feminism: Classical and Contemporary

Although it is possible to distinguish between Marxist and socialist feminist thought, it is quite difficult to do so. Over the years, I have become convinced that the differences between these two schools of thought are more a matter of emphasis than of substance. Classical Marxist feminists work within the conceptual terrain laid out by Marx, Engels, Lenin, and other nineteenth-century thinkers. They regard classism rather than sexism as the fundamental cause of women's oppression. In contrast, socialist feminists are not certain that classism is women's worst or only enemy. They write in view of Russia's twentieth-century failure to achieve socialism's ultimate goal—namely, the replacement of class oppression and antagonism with “an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”¹ Post-1917 Communism in the Soviet Union and later in the so-called Eastern Bloc was not true socialism but simply a new form of human exploitation and oppression. Women's lives under Communism, particularly during the Stalin years (1929–1953), were not manifestly better than women's lives under capitalism. Women's move into the productive workplace had not made them men's equals either there or at home. For these reasons and related ones, socialist feminists decided to move beyond relying on class as the sole category for understanding women's subordination to men. Increasingly, they tried “to understand women's subordination in a coherent and systematic way that integrates class and sex, as well as other aspects of identity such as race/ethnicity or sexual orientation.”²

Some Marxist Concepts and Theories

To appreciate the differences between classical Marxist and contemporary socialist feminism, we need to understand the Marxist concept of human nature. As noted in Chapter 1, liberals believe that several characteristics distinguish human beings from other animals. These characteristics include a set of abilities, such as the capacity for rationality and the use of language; a set of practices, such as religion, art, and science; and a set of attitude and behavior patterns, such as competitiveness and the tendency to put oneself over others. Marxists reject the liberal conception of human nature, claiming instead that what makes us different from other animals is our ability to produce our means of subsistence. We are what we are because of what we do—specifically, what we do to meet our basic needs through productive activities such as fishing, farming, and building. Unlike bees, beavers, and ants, whose activities are governed by instinct and who cannot willfully change themselves, we create ourselves in the process of intentionally transforming and manipulating nature.³

For the liberal, the ideas, thoughts, and values of individuals account for change over time. For the Marxist, material forces—the production and reproduction of social life—are the prime movers in history. In laying out a full explanation of how change takes place over time, an explanation usually termed *historical materialism*, Marx stated, “The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.”⁴ In other words, Marx believed a society’s total mode of production—that is, its forces of production (the raw materials, tools, and workers that actually produce goods) plus its relations of production (the ways in which production is organized)—generates a superstructure (a layer of legal, political, and social ideas) that in turn reinforces the mode of production. Adding to Marx’s point, Richard Schmitt later emphasized that the statement “Human beings create themselves” is not to be read as “Men and women, as *individuals*, make themselves what they are,” but instead as “Men and women, through production *collectively*, create a society that, in turn, shapes them.”⁵ So, for example, people in the United States think in certain ways about liberty, equality, and freedom *because* their mode of production is capitalist.

Like Marxists in general, Marxist and socialist feminists claim that social existence determines consciousness. For them, the observation that “women’s work is never done” is more than an aphorism; it is a description of the nature

of woman's work. Always on call, women form a conception of themselves they would not have if their roles in the family and the workplace did not keep them socially and economically subordinate to men. Thus, Marxist and socialist feminists believe we need to analyze the links between women's work status and women's self-image in order to understand the unique character of *women's* oppression.⁶

The Marxist Theory of Economics

To the degree Marxist and socialist feminists believe women's work shapes women's thoughts and thus "female nature," these thinkers also believe capitalism is a system of power relations as well as exchange relations. When capitalism is viewed as a system of exchange relations, it is described as a commodity or market society in which everything, including one's own labor power, has a price and all transactions are fundamentally exchange transactions. But when capitalism is viewed instead as a system of power relations, it is described as a society in which every kind of transactional relation is fundamentally exploitative. Thus, depending on one's emphasis, the worker-employer relationship can be looked at as either an exchange relationship in which items of equivalent value are freely traded—labor for wages—or as a workplace struggle in which the employer, who has superior power, takes advantage of workers in any number of ways.

Whereas liberals view capitalism as a system of voluntary exchange relations, Marxists and socialists view capitalism as a system of exploitative power relations. According to Marx, the value of any commodity is determined by the amount of labor, or actual expenditure of human energy and intelligence, necessary to produce it.⁷ To be more precise, the value of any commodity is equal to the *direct* labor incorporated in the commodity by workers, plus the *indirect* labor stored in workers' artificial appendages—the tools and machines made by the direct labor of their predecessors.⁸ Because all commodities are worth exactly the labor necessary to produce them and because workers' labor power (capacity for work) is a commodity that can be bought and sold, the value of workers' labor power is exactly the cost of whatever it takes (food, clothing, shelter) to maintain them throughout the workday. But there is a difference between what employers pay workers for their mere *capacity* to work (labor power) and the value that workers actually create when they put their work capacity to use in producing commodities.⁹ Marx termed this difference "surplus value," and from it employers derive their profits. Thus, capitalism is an exploitative system because employers pay workers only for their

labor power, without also paying workers for the human energy they expend and the intelligence they transfer into the commodities they produce.¹⁰

At this point in an analysis of Marxist economic thought, it seems reasonable to ask how employers get workers to labor for more hours than are necessary to produce the value of their subsistence, especially when workers receive no compensation for this extra work. The answer to this query is, as Marx explained in *Capital*, a simple one: Employers have a monopoly on the means of production, including factories, tools, land, means of transportation, and means of communication. Workers are forced to choose between being exploited and having no work at all. It is a liberal fiction that workers freely sign mutually beneficial contractual agreements with their employers. Capitalism is just as much a system of power relations as it is one of exchange relations. Workers are free to contract with employers only in the sense that employers do not hold a gun to their heads when they sign on the dotted line.

Interestingly, there is another, less discussed reason why employers are able to exploit workers under capitalism. According to Marx, capitalist ideologies lead workers and employers to focus on capitalism's surface structure of exchange relations.¹¹ As a result of this ideological ploy, which Marx called the *fetishism of commodities*, workers gradually convince themselves that even though their money is very hard earned, there is nothing inherently wrong with the specific exchange relationships into which they have entered, because life, in all its dimensions, is simply one colossal system of exchange relations.

That liberal ideologies, typically spawned in capitalist economics, present practices such as prostitution and surrogate motherhood as contractual exercises of free choice, then, is no accident, according to Marxist and socialist feminists. The liberal ideologies claim that women become prostitutes and surrogate mothers because they *prefer* these jobs over other available jobs. But, as Marxist and socialist feminists see it, when a poor, illiterate, unskilled woman chooses to sell her sexual or reproductive services, chances are her choice is more coerced than free. After all, if one has little else of value to sell besides one's body, one's leverage in the marketplace is quite limited.

The Marxist Theory of Society

Like the Marxist analysis of power, the Marxist analysis of class has provided both Marxist and socialist feminists with some of the conceptual tools necessary to understand women's oppression. Marx observed that every political economy—the primitive communal state, the slave epoch, the precapitalist society, and the bourgeois society—contains the seeds of its own destruction. Thus, according to Marx, there are within capitalism enough internal contradictions

to generate a class division dramatic enough to overwhelm the very system that produced it. Specifically, there exist many poor and propertyless workers. These workers live very modestly, receiving subsistence wages for their exhausting labor while their employers live in luxury. When these two groups of people, the haves and the have-nots, both become conscious of themselves *as* classes, said Marx, class struggle ensues and ultimately topples the system that produced these classes.¹² It is important to emphasize the dynamic nature of class. Classes do not simply appear. They are slowly and often painstakingly formed by similarly situated people who share the same wants and needs. According to Marx, people who belong to any class initially have no more unity than “potatoes in a sack of potatoes.”¹³ But through a long and complex process of struggling together about issues of local and later national interest to them, a group of people gradually becomes a unity, a true class. Because class unity is difficult to achieve, its importance cannot be overstated, said Marx. As soon as a group of people is fully conscious of itself as a class, it has a better chance of achieving its fundamental goals. There is power in group awareness.

Class consciousness is, in the Marxist framework, the opposite of false consciousness, a state of mind that impedes the creation and maintenance of true class unity. False consciousness causes exploited people to believe they are as free to act and speak as their exploiters are. The bourgeoisie is especially adept at fooling the proletariat. For this reason, Marxists discredit egalitarian, or welfare, liberalism, for example, as a ruling-class ideology that tricks workers into believing their employers actually care about them. As Marxists see it, fringe benefits such as generous health-care plans or paid maternity leave are not gifts employers generously bestow on workers, but a means to pull the wool over workers’ eyes. Grateful for the benefits their employers give them, workers minimize their own hardships and suffering. Like the ruling class, the workers begin to perceive the status quo as the best possible world for workers and employers alike. The more benefits employers give their workers, the less likely their workers will form a class capable of recognizing their true needs as human beings.

Because Marxist and socialist feminists wish to view women as a collectivity, Marxist teachings on class and class consciousness play a large role in Marxist and socialist feminist thought. Much debate within the Marxist and socialist feminist community has centered on the following question: Do women *per se* constitute a class? Given that some women are wives, daughters, friends, and lovers of *bourgeois* men, whereas other women are the wives, daughters, friends, and lovers of *proletarian* men, it would appear women do not constitute a single class in the strict Marxist sense. Yet, bourgeois and proletarian women’s domestic experiences, for example, may bear enough similarities to motivate

unifying struggles such as the 1970s wages-for-housework campaign (see discussion below). Thus, many Marxist and socialist feminists believe women can gain a consciousness of themselves as a *class* of workers by insisting, for example, that domestic work be recognized as real work, that is, productive work. The observation that wives and mothers usually love the people for whom they work does not mean that cooking, cleaning, and childcare are not productive work. At most it means wives' and mothers' working conditions are better than those of people who work for employers they dislike.¹⁴

By keeping the Marxist conceptions of class and class consciousness in mind, we can understand another concept that often plays a role in Marxist and socialist feminist thought: alienation. Like many Marxist terms, the term *alienation* is extraordinarily difficult to define simply. In *Karl Marx*, Allen Wood suggested we are alienated "if we either experience our lives as meaningless or ourselves as worthless, or else are capable of sustaining a sense of meaning and self-worth only with the help of illusions about ourselves or our condition."¹⁵ Robert Heilbroner added that alienation is a profoundly fragmenting experience. Things or persons who are or should be connected in some significant way are instead viewed as separate. As Heilbroner saw it, this sense of fragmentation and meaninglessness is particularly strong under capitalism.

As a result of invidious class distinctions, as well as the highly specialized and highly segmented nature of the work process, human existence loses its unity and wholeness in four basic ways. First, workers are alienated from the *product* of their labor. Not only do workers have no say in what commodities they will or will not produce, but the fruits of their labor are snatched from them. Therefore, the satisfaction of determining when, where, how, and to whom these commodities will be sold is denied the workers. What should partially express and constitute their being-as-workers confronts them as a thing apart, a thing alien.¹⁶

Second, workers are alienated from *themselves* because when work is experienced as something unpleasant to be gotten through as quickly as possible, it is deadening. When the potential source of workers' humanization becomes the actual source of their dehumanization, workers may undergo a major psychological crisis. They start feeling like hamsters on a hamster wheel, going nowhere.

Third, workers are alienated from *other human beings* because the structure of the capitalist economy encourages and even forces workers to see each other as competitors for jobs and promotions. When the source of workers' community (other workers experienced as cooperators, friends, people to be with) becomes instead the source of their isolation (other workers experienced as competitors, enemies, people to avoid), workers become disidentified with each other, losing an opportunity to add joy and meaning to their lives.

Fourth, workers are alienated from *nature* because the kind of work they do and the conditions under which they do it make them see nature as an obstacle to their survival. This negative perception of nature sets up an opposition where in fact a connectedness should exist—the connectedness among all elements in nature. The elimination of this type of alienation, entailing a return to a humane kind of work environment, is yet another important justification for the overthrow of capitalism.¹⁷

Building on the idea that in a capitalist society, human relations take on an alienated nature in which “the individual only feels himself or herself when detached from others,”¹⁸ Ann Foreman claimed this state of affairs is worse for women than it is for men:

The man exists in the social world of business and industry as well as in the family and therefore is able to express himself in these different spheres. For the woman, however, her place is within the home. Men’s objectification within industry, through the expropriation of the product of their labour, takes the form of alienation. But the effect of alienation on the lives and consciousness of women takes an even more oppressive form. Men seek relief from their alienation through their relations with women; for women there is no relief. For these intimate relations are the very ones that are essential structures of her oppression.¹⁹

As Foreman saw it, women’s alienation is profoundly disturbing because women experience themselves not as selves but as others. All too often, said Foreman, a woman’s sense of self is entirely dependent on her families’ and friends’ appreciation of her. If they express loving feelings toward her, she will be happy, but if they fail to give her even a thank-you, she will be sad. Thus, Marxist and socialist feminists aim to create a world in which women can experience themselves as whole persons, as integrated rather than fragmented beings, as people who can be happy even when they are unable to make their families and friends happy.

The Marxist Theory of Politics

Like the Marxist theories of economics and society, the Marxist theory of politics offers Marxist and socialist feminists insights to help liberate women from the forces that oppress them. As noted previously, class struggle takes a certain form within the workplace because the interests of the employers are not those of the workers. Whereas it is in the employers’ interests to use whatever tactics may be necessary (harassment, firing, violence) to get workers to

work ever more effectively and efficiently for less wages than their work is worth, it is in the workers' interests to use whatever countertactics may be necessary (sick time, coffee breaks, strikes) to limit the extent to which their labor power is used to produce sheer profit for their employers.

The relatively small and everyday class conflicts occurring within the capitalist workplace serve as preliminaries to the full-fledged, large-scale class struggles that Marx envisioned. As noted above, Marx predicted that as workers become increasingly aware of their common exploitation and alienation, they will achieve class consciousness. United, the workers will be able to fight their employers for control over the means of production (e.g., the nation's factories). If the workers manage to win this fight, Marx claimed that a highly committed, politically savvy, well-trained group of revolutionaries would subsequently emerge from the workers' ranks. Marx termed this special group of workers the "vanguard" of the full-scale revolution for which he hoped. More than anything else, Marx desired to replace capitalism with socialism, a nonexploitative, nonalienating political economy through which communism, "the complete and conscious return of man himself as a social, that is, human being,"²⁰ could come into existence.

Under capitalism, Marx suggested, people are largely free to *do* what they want to do within the confines of the system, but they have little say in determining the confines themselves. "Personality," said Marx, "is conditioned and determined by quite definite class relationships."²¹ Decades later, Richard Schmitt elaborated on Marx's powerful quote:

In as much as persons do certain jobs in society, they tend to acquire certain character traits, interests, habits, and so on. Without such adaptations to the demands of their particular occupations, they would not be able to do a great job. A capitalist who cannot bear to win in competition, or to outsmart someone, will not be a capitalist for long. A worker who is unwilling to take orders will not work very often. In this way we are shaped by the work environment, and this fact limits personal freedom for it limits what we can choose to be.²²

In contrast to the persons living under capitalism, persons living under communism are free not only to *do* but also to *be* what they want, because they have the power to see clearly and change the system that shapes them.

If we read between these lines, we can appreciate another of Marxism's major appeals to Marxist and socialist feminists. It promises to reconstitute human nature in ways that preclude all the pernicious dichotomies that have made slaves of some and masters of others. Marxism also promises to make

people free, a promise women would like to see someone keep. There is, after all, something very liberating about the idea of women and men constructing together the social structures and social roles that will permit both genders to realize their full human potential.

The Marxist Theory of Family Relations

Although the fathers of Marxism did not take women's oppression nearly as seriously as they did workers' oppression, some of them did offer explanations for why women are oppressed qua women. With the apparent blessing of Marx, Engels wrote *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1845), in which he showed how changes in the material conditions of people affect the organization of their family relations. He argued that before the family, or structured conjugal relations, there existed a primitive state of "promiscuous intercourse."²³ In this early state, every woman was fair game for every man, and vice versa. All were essentially married to all. In the process of natural selection, suggested Engels, various kinds of blood relatives were gradually excluded from consideration as eligible marriage partners.²⁴ As fewer and fewer women in the tribal group became available to any given man, individual men began to put forcible claims on individual women as their possessions. As a result, the pairing family, in which one man is married to one woman, came into existence.

Noting that when a man took a woman, he came to live in *her* household, Engels interpreted this state of affairs as a sign of women's economic power. Because women's work was vital for the tribe's survival and because women produced most of the material goods (e.g., bedding, clothing, cookware, tools) that could be passed on to future generations, Engels concluded that early pairing societies were probably matrilineal, with inheritance and lines of descent traced through the mother.²⁵ Later, Engels speculated that pairing societies may have been not merely matrilineal societies but also matriarchal societies in which women ruled at the political, social, and economic levels.²⁶ But his main and less debatable point remained that whatever power women had in past times, it was rooted in their position in the household, at that time the center of production.²⁷ Only if the site of production changed would women lose their advantaged position.²⁸ As it turned out, said Engels, a site change did occur. The "domestication of animals and the breeding of herds" outside the household led to an entirely new source of wealth for the human community.²⁹ Somehow, men gained control of the tribe's animals (Engels did not tell us why or how),³⁰ and the male-female power balance shifted in favor of men, as men learned to produce more than enough animals to meet the tribe's needs for milk and meat.

Surplus animals constituted an accumulation of wealth men used as a means of exchange between tribes. Possessing more than enough of a valuable socioeconomic good, men found themselves increasingly preoccupied with the issue of property inheritance. Directed through the mother's line, property inheritance was originally a minor matter of the bequest of a "house, clothing, crude ornaments and the tools for obtaining and preparing food—boats, weapons and domestic utensils of the simplest kinds."³¹ As production outside the household began to outstrip production within it, the traditional sexual division of labor between men and women, which had supposedly arisen out of the physiological differences between the sexes—specifically, the *sex act*³²—took on new social meanings. As men's work and production grew in importance, not only did the value of women's work and production decrease, but the status of women within society decreased. Because men now possessed things more valuable than the things women possessed and because men, for some unexplained reason, suddenly wanted *their own* biological children to get *their* possessions, men exerted enormous pressure to convert society from a matrilineal one into a patrilineal one. As Engels phrased it, mother right had "to be overthrown, and overthrown it was."³³

Engels presented the "overthrow of mother right" as "*the world-historic defeat of the female sex.*"³⁴ Having produced and staked a claim to wealth, men took control of the household, reducing women to the "slaves" of men's carnal desire and "mere instrument[s] for the production of [men's] children."³⁵ In this new familial order, said Engels, the husband ruled by virtue of his economic power: "He is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat."³⁶ Engels believed men's power over women is rooted in the fact that men, not women, control private property. The oppression of women will cease only with the dissolution of the institution of private property.

The emergence of private property and the shift to patrilineage also explained, for Engels, the transition to the monogamous family. Before the advent of technologies such as in vitro fertilization (see Chapter 2), it was always possible to identify the biological mother of a child. If the child came out of a woman's body, the child was the biological product of her egg and some man's sperm. In contrast, before the development of DNA testing to establish biological paternity, the identity of a biological father was uncertain because a woman could have been impregnated by a man other than her husband. Thus, to secure their wives' marital fidelity, men imposed the institution of heterosexual monogamy on women, the purpose of which was, according to Engels, to provide a vehicle for the guaranteed transfer of a father's private property to his biological children. Male dominance, in the forms of patrilineage and patriarchy, is simply the result of the class division between the propertied man and

the propertyless woman. Engels commented that monogamy was “the first form of the family to be based not on natural but on economic conditions.”³⁷ In his estimation, the monogamous family is the product not of love and commitment but of power plays and economic exigencies.

Because Engels viewed monogamous marriage as an economic institution that has nothing to do with love and everything to do with the transfer of private property, he insisted that if wives are to be emancipated from their husbands, women must first become economically independent of men. He stressed that the first presupposition for the emancipation of women is “the reintroduction of the entire female sex into public industry,” and the second is the socialization of housework and child-rearing.³⁸ Remarkably, Engels believed that proletarian women experience less oppression than do bourgeois women. As he saw it, the bourgeois family consists of a relationship between a husband and a wife in which the husband agrees to support his wife provided that she promises to remain sexually faithful to him and to reproduce only his legitimate heirs. “This marriage of convenience,” observed Engels, “often enough turns into the crassest prostitution—sometimes on both sides, but much more generally on the part of the wife, who differs from the ordinary courtesan only in that she does not hire out her body, like a wageworker, on piecework, but sells it into slavery once and for all.”³⁹

In contrast to the bourgeois marriage, the proletarian marriage is not, in Engels’s estimation, a mode of prostitution, because the material conditions of the proletarian family differ substantially from those of the bourgeois family. Not only is the proletariat’s lack of private property significant in removing the primary male incentive for monogamy—namely, the reproduction of legitimate heirs for one’s property—but the general employment of proletarian women as workers outside the home also leads to a measure of equality between husband and wife. This equality, according to Engels, provides the foundation of true “sex-love.” In addition to these differences, the household authority of the proletarian husband, unlike that of the bourgeois husband, is not likely to receive the full support of the legal establishment. For all these reasons, Engels concluded that with the exception of “residual brutality” (spouse abuse), all “the material foundations of male dominance had ceased to exist” in the proletarian home.⁴⁰

Classical Marxist Feminism: General Reflections

Affirming the ideas of Marx and Engels, classical Marxist feminists tried to use a class analysis rather than a gender analysis to explain women’s oppression. A particularly good example of classical Marxist feminism appeared in