



**TOWARD
A FEMINIST THEORY
OF THE STATE**

Catharine A. MacKinnon

*Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England
1989*



*I. FEMINISM
AND MARXISM*

1 | *The Problem of Marxism and Feminism*

Marxism and feminism are one and that one is Marxism.

—Heidi Hartmann and Amy
Bridges, "The Unhappy Marriage
of Marxism and Feminism"

Sexuality is to feminism what work is to marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away. Marxist theory argues that society is fundamentally constructed of the relations people form as they do and make things needed to survive humanly. Work is the social process of shaping and transforming the material and social worlds, creating people as social beings as they create value. It is that activity by which people become who they are. Class is its structure, production its consequence, capital a congealed form, and control its issue.

Implicit in feminist theory is a parallel argument: the molding, direction, and expression of sexuality organizes society into two sexes: women and men. This division underlies the totality of social relations. Sexuality is the social process through which social relations of gender are created, organized, expressed, and directed, creating the social beings we know as women and men, as their relations create society. As work is to marxism, sexuality to feminism is socially constructed yet constructing, universal as activity yet historically specific, jointly comprised of matter and mind. As the organized expropriation of the work of some for the benefit of others defines a class, workers, the organized expropriation of the sexuality of some for the use of others defines the sex, woman. Heterosexuality is its social

structure, desire its internal dynamic, gender and family its congealed forms, sex roles its qualities generalized to social persona, reproduction a consequence, and control its issue.

Marxism and feminism provide accounts of the way social arrangements of patterned and cumulative disparity can be internally rational and systematic yet unjust. Both are theories of power, its social derivations and its maldistribution. Both are theories of social inequality. In unequal societies, gender and with it sexual desire and kinship structures, like value and with it acquisitiveness and the forms of property ownership, are considered presocial, part of the natural world, primordial or magical or aboriginal. As marxism exposes value as a social creation, feminism exposes desire as socially relational, internally necessary to unequal social orders but historically contingent.¹

The specificity of marxism and feminism is not incidental. To be deprived of control over work relations in marxism, over sexual relations in feminism, defines each theory's conception of lack of power per se. They do not mean to exist side by side, pluralistically, to ensure that two separate spheres of social life are not overlooked, the interests of two discrete groups are not obscured, or the contributions of two sets of variables are not ignored. They exist to argue, respectively, that the relations in which many work and few gain, in which some dominate and others are subordinated, in which some fuck and others get fucked and everybody knows what those words mean,² are the prime moment of politics.

What if the claims of each theory are taken equally seriously, each on its own terms? Can two social processes be basic at once? Can two groups be subordinated in conflicting ways, or do they merely crosscut? Can two theories, each of which purports to account for the same thing—power as such—be reconciled? Confronted on equal terms, these theories at minimum pose fundamental questions for each other. Is male dominance a creation of capitalism, or is capitalism one expression of male dominance? What does it mean for class analysis if a social group is defined and exploited through means that seem largely independent of the organization of production, if in forms appropriate to it? What does it mean for a sex-based analysis if capitalism might not be materially altered if it were fully sex integrated or even controlled by women? Supposing that the structure and interests served by the socialist state and the capitalist state differ in class terms, are they equally predicated upon sex inequality? To the

extent their forms and behaviors resemble one another, could gender be their commonality? Is there a relationship between the wealth of wealthy men and the poverty of poor women? Is there a relationship between the power of some classes over others and the power of all men over all women? Is there a relationship between the fact that the few have ruled the many and the fact that those few have been men?

Instead of confronting these questions, marxists and feminists have usually either dismissed or, in the more active form of the same thing, subsumed each other. Marxists have criticized feminism as bourgeois in theory and in practice, meaning that feminism works in the interest of the ruling class. They argue that to analyze society in terms of sex ignores the primacy of class and glosses over class divisions among women, dividing the proletariat. Feminist demands, it is claimed, could be fully satisfied within capitalism, so their pursuit undermines and deflects the effort for basic change. Efforts to eliminate barriers to women's personhood—arguments for access to life chances without regard to sex—are seen as liberal and individualistic. Whatever women have in common is considered to be based in nature, not in society. When cross-cultural analyses of women's social conditions do not seem to support this analysis, women's conditions are seen as not common or shared, and analyses that claim they are, are called totalizing and ahistorical. When cross-cultural analyses of women's social conditions do support this analysis, women's status is seen as a universal, or analyses based on it are considered to lack cultural specificity. The women's movement's focus upon attitudes, beliefs, and emotions as powerful components of social reality is criticized as formally idealist; the composition of the women's movement, purportedly of middle-class educated women, is advanced as an explanation for its opportunism.

Feminists charge that marxism is male defined in theory and in practice, meaning that it moves within the worldview and in the interest of men. Feminists argue that analyzing society exclusively in class terms ignores the distinctive social experiences of the sexes, obscuring women's unity. Marxist demands, it is claimed, could be (and in part have been) satisfied without altering women's inequality to men. Feminists have often found that working-class movements and the left undervalue women's work and concerns, neglect the role of feelings and beliefs in a focus on institutional and material change, denigrate women in practice and in everyday life, and in general fail

to distinguish themselves from any other ideology or group dominated by male interests, where justice for women is concerned. Marxists and feminists each accuse the other of seeking what in each one's terms is reform—alterations that appease and assuage and improve in accommodation to structures of inequality—where, again in each one's terms, a fundamental transformation is required. At its most extreme, the mutual perception is not only that the other's analysis is wrong, but that its success would be a defeat.

Neither set of allegations is groundless. In the feminist view, sex, in analysis and in reality, does divide classes, a fact marxists have been more inclined to deny or ignore than to explain or change. Marxists, similarly, have seen parts of the women's movement function as a special interest group to advance the class-privileged: educated and professional women. At the same time, to consider this group coextensive with "the women's movement" precludes questioning the social processes that give disproportionate visibility to the movement's least broadly based segment. Accepting a middle-class definition of the women's movement has distorted perception of its actual composition and made invisible the diverse ways in which many women—notably Black women and working-class women—have long moved against gendered determinants. But advocates of women's interests have not always been class conscious; some have exploited class-based arguments for advantage, even when the interests of women, working-class women, were thereby obscured.

In 1866, for example, in an act often thought to inaugurate the first wave of feminism, John Stuart Mill petitioned the English Parliament for women's suffrage with the following partial justification: "Under whatever conditions, and within whatever limits, men are admitted to suffrage, there is not a shadow of justification for not admitting women under the same. The majority of women of any class are not likely to differ in political opinion from the majority of men in the same class."³ Perhaps Mill meant that, to the extent class determines opinion, sex is irrelevant. In this sense, the argument narrowly fits the purpose of eliminating gender as a restriction on the vote. Mill personally supported universal suffrage. And, as it happened, working-class men got the vote before women of any class. But this argument can also justify limiting the extension of the franchise to women who "belong to" men of the same class that already exercises it—in which

light it is both demeaning to all women and works to the detriment of the excluded underclass, "their" women included.

This kind of reasoning has been confined neither to the issue of the vote nor to the nineteenth century. Mill's logic is embedded in the theoretical structure of liberalism that underlies much contemporary feminist theory and justifies much of the marxist critique. His view that women should be allowed to engage in politics was an expression of Mill's concern that the state not restrict individuals' self-government, their freedom to develop talents for their own growth, and their ability to contribute to society for the good of humanity. As an empirical rationalist, he resisted attributing to biology what could be explained as social conditioning. As a kind of utilitarian, he found most sex-based inequalities inaccurate or dubious, inefficient, and therefore unjust. That women should have the liberty, as individuals, to achieve the limits of self-development without arbitrary interference extended to women Mill's meritocratic goal of the self-made man, condemning (what has since come to be termed) sexism as an irrational interference with personal initiative and *laissez-faire*.

The hospitality of such an analysis to marxist concerns is problematic. Mill's argument could be extended to cover class as one more arbitrary, socially conditioned factor that produces inefficient development of talent and unjust distribution of resources among individuals. But although this extrapolation might be in a sense materialist, it would not be a class analysis. Mill himself does not even allow for income leveling. Unequal distribution of wealth is exactly what *laissez-faire* and unregulated personal initiative produce. The individual concept of rights which this theory requires on a juridical level (especially but not only in the economic sphere), a concept that produces the tension in liberalism between liberty for each and equality among all, pervades liberal feminism, substantiating the criticism that feminism is for the privileged few.

The marxist criticism that feminism focuses upon feelings and attitudes is also based on something real: the importance to feminism of women's own perceptions of their situation. The practice of consciousness raising, not only or even primarily as a concrete event but more as a collective approach to critique and change, has been a technique of analysis, structure of organization, method of practice, and theory of social change of the women's movement.⁴ In consciousness-

raising groups, which were common in the United States in the 1970s, the impact of male dominance was concretely uncovered and analyzed through the collective speaking of women's experience from the perspective of that experience. Because marxists tend to conceive of powerlessness, first and last, as concrete and externally imposed, they believe that it must be concretely and externally undone to be changed. Through consciousness raising taken more broadly, women's powerlessness was found to be both externally imposed and deeply internalized. For example, femininity is women's identity to women as well as women's desirability to men—indeed, it becomes identity to women because it is imposed through men's standards for desirability in women. From this practical analytic, a distinctly feminist concept of consciousness and its place in social order and change has emerged. It does not substitute one set of professed ideas for another and declare change, in the mode of liberal idealism. Nevertheless, what marxism conceives as change in consciousness is not, within marxism, a form of social change in itself. For feminism, it can be, but this is because women's oppression is not just in the head, so feminist consciousness is not just in the head either. But to the materially deprived, the pain, isolation, and thingification of women who have been pampered and pacified into nonpersonhood is difficult to swallow as a form of oppression. As a result, changing it is difficult to see as a form of liberation in any but the most reduced sense. This model is particularly difficult to swallow for women who will never carry a briefcase and whom no man has ever put on a pedestal.

Marxism, similarly, has not been just misunderstood. Marxist theory has traditionally attempted to comprehend all meaningful social variance in class terms. In this respect, sex parallels race and nation as an undigested but persistently salient challenge to the exclusivity or even the primacy of class as social explanation. Marxists typically extend class to cover women, a division and submersion that, to feminism, is inadequate to women's divergent, diverse, and common experience. For example, in 1912 Rosa Luxemburg addressed a group of women on the issue of suffrage:

Most of these bourgeois women who act like lionesses in the struggle against "male prerogatives" would trot like docile lambs in the camp of conservative and clerical reaction if they had the suffrage. Indeed, they would certainly be a good deal more reactionary than the male part

of their class. Aside from the few who have taken jobs or professions, the bourgeoisie do not take part in social production. They are nothing but co-consumers of the surplus product their men extort from the proletariat. They are parasites of the parasites of the social body.⁷

Luxemburg's sympathies lay with "proletarian women," who derive their right to vote from being "productive for society like the men."⁶ Her blind spot to gender occupied the same place in her perspective that Mill's blind spot to class did in his. Mill defended women's suffrage on gender grounds with a logic that excluded working-class women; Luxemburg defended women's suffrage on class grounds, although the vote would have benefited women without regard to class.

Women as women, women unmodified by class distinctions and apart from nature, were simply unthinkable to Mill, as to most liberals, and to Luxemburg, as to most marxists. Feminist theory asks marxism: what *is* class for women? Luxemburg, again like Mill within her own frame of reference, subliminally recognized that women derive their class position from their personal alliances with men. This may help explain why women do not unite against male dominance, but it does not explain that dominance, which cuts across class lines even as it takes some forms peculiar to classes. What distinguishes the bourgeois woman from her domestic servant is that the latter is paid (if barely), while the former is kept (if contingently). Is this a difference in social productivity or only in its measures, measures that themselves may be products of women's undervalued status? The tasks the women perform and their availability for sexual access and reproductive use are strikingly similar. Luxemburg saw the bourgeois woman of her time as a "parasite of a parasite" but failed to consider her possible commonality with the proletarian woman who is the slave of a slave. In the case of bourgeois women, to limit the analysis of women's status to their relationship to capitalism and to limit this analysis to their relations to capitalism through men is to see only its vicarious aspect. To fail to do this in the case of proletarian women is to miss its vicarious aspect. In both cases, to define women's status solely in class terms is entirely to miss their status as women defined through relations with men, which is a defining relational status they share even though the men through whom they acquire it differ.

Feminist observations of women's situation in socialist countries, though not conclusive on the contribution of marxist theory to understanding women's situation, have supported the feminist theoretical critique.⁷ In the feminist view, socialist countries have solved many social problems—women's subordination not included. The criticism is not that socialism has not automatically liberated women in the process of transforming production (assuming that this transformation is occurring). Nor is it to diminish the significance of such changes for women: "There is a difference between a society in which sexism is expressed in the form of female infanticide and a society in which sexism takes the form of unequal representation on the Central Committee. And the difference is worth dying for."⁸ Some feminists, however, have more difficulty separating the two: "It seems to me that a country that wiped out the tsetse fly can by fiat put an equal number of women on the Central Committee."⁹ The basic feminist criticism is that these countries do not make a priority of working to change women's status relative to men that distinguishes them from nonsocialist societies in the way that their pursuit of other goals distinguishes them. Capitalist countries value women in terms of their "merit" by male standards; in socialist countries women seem invisible except in their capacity as "workers." This term seldom includes the work that remains women's distinctive service to men, regardless of the politics of those men: housework, prostitution and other sexual servicing, childbearing, childrearing. Sexual violence is typically barely mentioned. The concern of socialist and socialist revolutionary leadership for ending women's confinement to traditional roles too often seems limited to making their labor available to the regime, leading feminists to wonder whose interests are served by this version of liberation. Women become as free as men to work outside the home while men remain free from work within it. The same pattern occurs under capitalism. When woman's labor or militancy suits the needs of emergency, she is suddenly man's equal, only to regress when the urgency recedes.¹⁰ Feminists do not argue that it means the same to women to be on the bottom in a feudal regime, a capitalist regime, and a socialist regime. The commonality is that, despite real changes, bottom is bottom.

Where such attitudes and practices come to be criticized, as in Cuba or China, changes appear gradual and precarious, as they do in capitalist countries, even where the effort looks major. If seizures of

state and productive power overturn work relations, they do not overturn sex relations at the same time or in the same way, as a class analysis of sex would, and in some cases did, predict and promise.¹¹ Sexual violence, for example, is unchanged. Neither technology nor socialism, both of which purport to alter women's role at the point of production, has ever yet equalized women's status relative to men, even in the workforce. Nothing has. Sex equality appears to require a separate effort—an effort with necessary economic dimensions, potentially supported by a revolutionary regime and shaped by transformed relations to production—but a separate effort nonetheless. In light of these experiences, women's struggles, whether under capitalist or socialist regimes, appear to feminists to have more in common with each other than with marxist struggles anywhere.¹²

Attempts to create a synthesis between marxism and feminism, termed socialist-feminism, have recognized neither the separate integrity of each theory nor the depth of the antagonism between them. Many attempts at a unified theory began as an effort to justify women's struggles in marxist terms, as if only that could make them legitimate. Although feminism has largely redirected its efforts from justifying itself within any other perspective to developing a perspective of its own, this anxiety lurks under many synthetic attempts. The juxtapositions that result emerge as unfronted as they started: feminist or marxist, usually the latter. Socialist-feminist practice often divides along the same lines, consisting largely in organizational cross-memberships and mutual support on specific issues, with more support by women of issues of the left than by the left of women's issues.¹³ Women with feminist sympathies urge attention to women's issues by left or labor groups; marxist women pursue issues of class within feminist groups; explicitly socialist-feminist groups come together and divide, often at the hyphen.

Most attempts at synthesis try to integrate or explain the appeal of feminism by incorporating issues feminism identifies as central—the family, housework, sexuality, reproduction, socialization, personal life—within an essentially unchanged marxian analysis.¹⁴ According to what type of marxist the theorist is, women become a caste, a stratum, a cultural group, a division in civil society, a secondary contradiction, or a nonantagonistic contradiction. Women's liberation becomes a precondition, a measure of society's general emancipation, part of the superstructure, or an important aspect of the class struggle.

No matter how perceptive about the contribution of feminism or how sympathetic to women's interests, these attempts cast feminism, ultimately, as a movement within marxism.¹⁵ Most commonly, women are reduced to some other category, such as "women workers," which is then treated as coextensive with all women.¹⁶ Or, in what has become near reflex, women become "the family," as if this single form of women's definition and confinement, which is then divided on class lines, can be presumed to be the crucible of women's determination.¹⁷ A common approach to treating women's situation as coterminous with the family is to make women's circumstances the occasion for reconciling Marx with Freud. Such work is typically more Freudian than marxist, leaving feminism as the jumping-off point.¹⁸

Or, the marxist meaning of reproduction, the iteration of productive relations, is punned into an analysis of biological reproduction, as if women's bodily differences from men must account for their subordination to men; and as if this social analogue to the biological makes women's definition material, therefore based on a division of "labor" after all, therefore real, therefore potentially unequal. Sometimes reproduction refers to biological reproduction, sometimes to the reproduction of daily life, as in housework, sometimes to both.¹⁹ Family-based theories of women's status analyze biological reproduction as part of the family, while work-based theories see it as work. Sexuality, if noticed at all, is, like "everyday life,"²⁰ analyzed in gender-neutral terms, as if its social meaning can be presumed to be the same, or coequal, or complementary, for women and men.²¹ Although a unified theory of social inequality is prefigured in these strategies of subordination, staged progression, and assimilation of women's concerns to left concerns, at most an uneven combination is accomplished. Some works push these limits.²² But socialist-feminism basically stands before the task of synthesis as if nothing essential to either theory fundamentally opposes their wedding—often as if the union had already occurred and need only be celebrated. However sympathetically, "the woman question" is always reduced to some other question, instead of being seen as *the* question, calling for analysis on its own terms.

2 | *A Feminist Critique of Marx and Engels*

We often romanticize what we have first despised.

—Wendell Berry, *The Gift of
Good Land*

To Marx, women were defined by nature, not by society. To him, sex was within that "material substratum" that was not subject to social analysis, making his explicit references to women or to sex largely peripheral or parenthetical.¹ With issues of sex, unlike with class, Marx did not see that the line between the social and the pre-social is a line society draws. Marx ridiculed treating value and class as if they were natural givens. He bitingly criticized theories that treated class as if it arose spontaneously and operated mechanistically yet harmoniously in accord with natural laws. He identified such theories as justifications for an unjust status quo. Yet this is exactly the way he treated gender. Even when women produced commodities as waged labor, Marx wrote about them primarily as mothers, housekeepers, and members of the weaker sex. His work shares with liberal theory the view that women naturally belong where they are socially placed.

Engels, by contrast, considered women's status a social phenomenon that needed explanation. He just failed to explain it. Expanding upon Marx's few suggestive comments, Engels tried to explain women's subordination within a theory of the historical development of the family in the context of class relations. Beneath Engels' veneer of dialectical dynamism lies a static, positivistic materialism that reifies woman socially to such an extent that her status might as well have been considered naturally determined. Marx and Engels each take for granted crucial features of relations between the sexes: Marx because woman is nature and nature is given, and Engels because woman is the family and he is largely uncritical of woman's work and sexual role within it.