

Marx on Gender and the Family: A Summary

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Many feminist scholars have had, at best, an ambiguous relationship with Marx and Marxism. One of the most important areas of contention involves the Marx/Engels relationship.

Studies by Georg Lukács, Terrell Carver, and others have shown significant differences between Marx and Engels on dialectics as well as a number of other issues.¹ Building on these studies, I have explored their differences with regard to gender and the family as well. This is especially relevant to current debates, since a number of feminist scholars have criticized Marx and Engels for what they see as their economic determinism. However, Lukács and Carver both point to the degree of economic determinism as a significant difference between the two. Both view Engels as more monistic and scientific than Marx. Raya Dunayevskaya is one of the few to separate Marx

and Engels on gender, while likewise pointing to the more monistic and deterministic nature of Engels's position, in contrast to Marx's more nuanced dialectical understanding of gender-relations.[2](#)

In recent years, there has been little discussion of Marx's writings on gender and the family, but in the 1970s and '80s, these writings were subject to a great deal of debate. In a number of cases, elements of Marx's overall theory were merged with psychoanalytic or other forms of feminist theory by feminist scholars such as Nancy Hartsock and Heidi Hartmann.[3](#) These scholars viewed Marx's theory as primarily gender-blind and in need of an additional theory to understand gender-relations as well. However, they retained Marx's historical materialism as a starting point for understanding production. Moreover, a number of Marxist feminists also made their own contributions in the late 1960s to '80s, particularly in the area of political economy. For example, Margaret Benston, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Silvia Federici, and Wally Secombe have all tried to revalue housework.[4](#) In addition, Lise Vogel has attempted to move beyond dual systems towards a unitary understanding of political economy and social reproduction.[5](#) Nancy Holmstrom has also shown that Marx can be used to understand the historical development of women's nature.[6](#)

The dual-systems theory of patriarchy and capitalism which was a common form of socialist feminism in the 1970s and '80s was viewed as a failed project by many in the 1990s and beyond. In

any event, the fall of Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe probably had a negative effect on the popularity of socialist feminism. As Iris Young had already argued, dual-systems theory was inadequate since it was based on two very different theories of society—one involving the historic dynamic development of society, primarily social, economic and technological, and the other based on a static psychological view of human nature.⁷ These two theories are very difficult to reconcile because of these vast differences. However, their critiques of what they viewed as Marx's determinism, gender-blind categories, and emphasis on production at the expense of reproduction provided a starting point for my reexamination of Marx's work by means of close textual analysis—this in addition to the work of the Marxist feminists mentioned above.

Marx's work contained elements of Victorian ideology, but there is much of interest on gender and the family scattered throughout his work. As early as 1844, in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx argued that women's position in society could be used as a measure of the development of society as a whole. He was certainly not the first to make a statement such as this—Charles Fourier is often attributed as the inspiration for this statement—but for Marx, this was more than simply a call for men to change the position of women. Instead, Marx was making a dialectical argument directly related to his overall theory of society. In order for society to advance beyond its capitalist form, new social relations would have to be formed

that did not rely solely upon a crude, alienated formulation of value. Human beings would have to become able to see each other as valuable in themselves, rather than as only worth what one individual can provide to another. Women would be especially significant in this regard, since they have tended to be a marginalized group within most, if not all, societies. Thus, men and women would have to reach a point of development where an individual is valued for who they are, rather than any abstract category of man, woman, etc.

Moreover, Marx appears to point in the direction of gender as a dynamic rather than static category. Certainly, Marx never directly made this claim: however, in the 1844 *Manuscripts* and in *The German Ideology*, he provided a strong critique of, and alternative to, traditional dualistic views of the nature/society dualism. Instead of nature and society existing as two distinct entities that interact with each other without fundamentally changing the essence of itself or the other, Marx argues that the two are dialectically related. As human beings interact with nature through labor, both the individual and nature is changed. This occurs because human beings exist as part of nature, and the labor process provides the means for such a temporary unity. Since both nature and society are not static entities, Marx argued that there can be no transhistorical notion of what is “natural.” Instead, a concept of “natural” can only be relevant for specific historical circumstances.

Although one should not draw too close a parallel between the nature/culture dualism and the man/woman dualism—to do so could lead to a reification of these categories that we seek to transform—the sort of dialectical thinking that Marx evinces in regard to the nature/culture dualism is also evident in Marx and Engels’s discussion of the gender-division of labor in *The German Ideology*. Here, they point to the division of labor in the early family as something that is not completely “natural.” Instead, even in their brief discussion of the development of the family, they point out that this division of labor based on gender is only “natural” for very undeveloped productive relations, where women’s different biology would make it difficult for them to carry out certain physically demanding tasks. The implication is that women’s supposed inferiority in these societies is something that can change as society changes. Moreover, since a social element is involved, more is needed than technological development: women will have to work themselves to change their situation.

In at least two other places in his early writings, Marx discusses the position of women in capitalist society. In *The Holy Family*, Marx criticizes Eugène Sue’s moralistic commentary on the fictional Paris prostitute, Fleur de Marie, in *Les Mystères de Paris*. In this novel, Fleur de Marie is “saved” from poverty and her life as a prostitute by a minor German prince. He entrusts her into the care of a religious woman and a priest who both

teach her of the immorality of her behavior. Eventually, she enters a nunnery and dies shortly thereafter.

Here, Marx criticizes Sue for his uncritical acceptance of Catholic social teaching which focuses on an abstract form of morality that can never actually be achieved. Human beings are not merely spiritual beings that can ignore their bodily needs. This was particularly relevant for someone like Fleur de Marie since, as Marx notes, she had no options available to her other than prostitution to provide herself with a livelihood. However, the priest showed Marie her moral degeneration and told her of the guilt that she should feel, despite the fact that she had no real choice in the matter. Thus, in this text, Marx shows a great deal of sympathy for the plight of working-class women. Moreover, he criticizes the one-sidedness of Christianity, which seeks to raise the position of a pure form of mind against a pure form of the body.

Marx, however, did not limit his critique of women's concrete situation under capitalism to the working class. In his 1846 essay/translation of Peuchet's work on suicide, Marx points to familial oppression within the upper classes.⁸ Three of the four cases that Marx discusses involve female suicide due to familial oppression. In one case, a married woman committed suicide, at least in part because her jealous husband confined her to the home and was physically and sexually abusive. The second case involved an engaged woman who spent the night at her fiancé's house. After she returned home, her parents publicly humiliated

her, and she later drowned herself. The final case involved the inability of a young woman to get an abortion after an affair with her aunt's husband.

In two of the cases, Marx shows great sympathy for the plight of these women by emphasizing certain passages from Peuchet and surreptitiously adding his own remarks. Moreover, Marx points to the need for a total transformation of the bourgeois family, giving emphasis to the following passage from Peuchet: "*The revolution did not topple all tyrannies. The evil which one blames on arbitrary forces exists in families, where it causes crises, analogous to those of revolutions.*"⁹ In this way, Marx points to the family in its bourgeois form as oppressive, and something that must be significantly changed if a better society is to come about.

Marx and Engels returned to a critique of the bourgeois family in *The Communist Manifesto*. There, they argued that the family in its bourgeois form, based primarily on the management and transfer of property, was in a state of dissolution. The material conditions that had led to this form of the family were disappearing among the proletarians because they had no property to give to their children. They may have once been small subsistence farmers, but this was no longer possible as land was expropriated by a number of means and they were forced into the cities and factories to make their livelihood. Without this ability to transmit property to their children after their death and to control their family's labor-power during their

lifetime, the father's power was diminished significantly, leading in the direction of a different form of the family. Marx and Engels, at this point, did not discuss in any detail what would potentially come after the dissolution of this form of the family, however.

Although *Capital* is devoted to the critique of political economy, there is a significant amount of material on gender and the family. In it Marx returns to and concretizes what he described as the abolition [*Aufhebung*] of the family in *The Communist Manifesto*. As machinery is introduced into the factories, requiring less physically demanding labor, women and children become important categories of workers as well. Capital finds these workers particularly valuable, since they are from an oppressed group that can be compelled to work for less.

A number of other passages in *Capital* illustrate that Marx held a much more nuanced view of the position of women in the workforce than most feminists acknowledge. For example, as women entered the workforce, he writes, they potentially gained power in their private lives since they now contributed monetarily to the family's welfare, and were no longer under the direct control of their husbands or fathers for a large portion of the day. This had a significant effect on the family. Here, Marx shows both sides of this development. On one hand, long hours and night-work tended to undermine traditional family structures, as women were to a certain extent "masculinized" by their work and were often unable to care for their children to the

same extent that they had been able to do in the past. On the other, in a later passage, Marx notes that this seeming “deterioration of character” led in the opposite direction—towards “a higher form of the family” in which women would be the true equals of men.[10](#)

Even though, Marx’s discussion of the oppression of women workers was somewhat limited, in *Capital*, volume I as well as his earlier draft material for *Capital* he offers a strong critique of the concept of productive labor under capitalism. Here, he makes a strong distinction between the concept of productive labor under capitalism and a concept of productive labor *as such*. The first is a one-sided understanding of productivity, where the only relevant factor is the production of surplus value for the capitalist. However, the second concept of productive labor focuses on the production of use values. Here, labor is valued as such if it produces something that can be used by individuals or society at large. This provides at least some ground for revaluing traditional women’s labor, even though Marx discussed this very little.

Marx’s political writings illustrate a certain evolution over time. Marx’s theoretical insights are often incorporated into his political activities. Some of his earliest political writings on the strikes in Preston, England in 1853–1854 offer a relatively uncritical assessment of the workers’ demand for a family wage for men. While Marx never directly repudiated this type of argument, his later positions appear to have changed, since he

worked to incorporate women into the First International on an equal basis to men in the 1860s.

Marx's later work illustrates a further appreciation of working women's demands during and after the Paris Commune. This is especially evident in the 1880 "Programme of the Parti Ouvrier," co-written by Marx, Paul Lafargue, and Jules Guesde. The preamble, written solely by Marx, states "That the emancipation of the productive class is that of all human beings without distinction of sex or race."¹¹ This was an especially strong statement in France, where the rather sexist Proudhonist tradition predominated among socialists.

In his writings for the *New York Tribune* in 1858, Marx returned to his discussion of the position of upper-class women in capitalist society. In two articles for the *Tribune*, Marx recounts the confinement of an aristocratic woman to an asylum in order to silence her and prevent her from further embarrassing her politically influential husband. Here, Marx criticizes all involved in Lady Bulwer-Lytton's confinement, arguing that she was far from insane. While Marx does not discuss the ways in which women in particular are often falsely confined as a means of control, he does note the ease with which people can be confined regardless of their actual psychological state, if those requesting the confinement are wealthy and powerful enough to induce medical professionals to give their signatures. Additionally, he shows a great deal of sympathy for Lady Bulwer-Lytton, who was effectively silenced due to an agreement by which she was

only able to regain her freedom so long as she agreed to never discuss the incident again.

His last years, from 1879 to 1883, were among the most theoretically interesting periods of Marx's life, especially concerning gender and the family. In his research notebooks, as well as his letters and published writings, he began to articulate a less deterministic model of social development, in which less-developed societies could be the first to carry out revolutions so long as they were followed by revolutions in more advanced states. Marx incorporated new historical subjects into his theory. It was not just the working class as an abstract entity that was capable of revolution. Peasants, and especially women, also became important forces for change within Marx's theory. These notebooks give some indications, albeit in a fragmentary way, of how Marx saw women as subjects in the historical process.

Marx's notes on Morgan are particularly important, since they provide a direct comparison with Engels's *Origin of the Family*, which Engels claimed to be a relatively close representation of Marx's reading of Morgan's *Ancient Society*. But there are significant differences. The most important of these are Marx's less deterministic understanding of societal development and his more dialectical grasp of contradiction within the relatively egalitarian clan.

Engels tended to focus almost solely and one-sidedly on economic and technological change as factors in societal development. Marx, in contrast, took a more dialectical approach, where social organization is not only a subjective factor, but in the right situation can become an objective one as well. This is particularly relevant to understanding their differences on gender oppression. Engels argued that the development of agricultural technology, private property, and the subsequent changes in the clan from mother-right to father-right led to the “world-historic defeat of the female sex,” where women would remain in a condition of subjugation until the destruction of private property. In contrast, Marx not only noted the subordinate position of women, but also pointed to the potential for change, even under private property, with his discussion of the Greek goddesses. Even though ancient Greek society was quite oppressive to women, confining them to their own section of the home, Marx argued that the Greek goddesses potentially provided an alternative model for women. Marx also showed in these notes the progress of upper-class Roman women, in contrast to their Greek counterparts. Moreover, Marx tended to take a more nuanced and dialectical approach to the development of contradictions in these early egalitarian societies. Engels tended to view the relatively egalitarian communal societies as lacking significant contradictions, especially with regard to gender relations.¹² Marx, however, pointed to limitations in women’s rights in the communally based Iroquois society.

Engels's *Origin of the Family* only discussed Marx's notes on Morgan's *Ancient Society*. But Marx's notebooks on ethnology span a number of other sources. His notes on Henry Sumner Maine's *Lectures on the Early History of Institutions* and Ludwig Lange's *Römische Alterthümer* ("Ancient Rome") offer significant discussions of gender and the family in pre-capitalist societies as well, particularly Ireland, India, and Rome.¹³ In his notes on both authors, Marx appears to have appropriated much of Morgan's theory of the development of the clan. While Marx's notes on Maine tend to be much more critical than those on Lange, in both cases Marx criticizes their uncritical acceptance of the patriarchal family as the first form.

This is particularly important since it tends to point in the direction of a historical understanding of the family. In these, as well as the Morgan notes, Marx charts the contradictions present in each form of the family and how these contradictions sharpen, leading to significant changes in the structure of the family. Here, Marx appears to view the family as subject to a similar dialectic as that of other areas of society.

Evaluating Marx's Work On Gender and the Family For Today

Historically, Marxism's relationship with feminism has been tenuous at best, often due to the lack of discussion of gender and traditional women's issues by many Marxists. Moreover, even where gender and the family have been addressed, these studies tend to follow Engels's less nuanced, more economically

oriented argument. However, I think Marx's work on gender and the family displays significant differences from those of Engels. Important questions remain regarding the possible value of Marx's views on gender and the family: What, if anything, does Marx have to offer to contemporary feminist debates? Is there the possibility of a Marxist feminism that does not lapse into economic determinism or privilege class over gender in analyzing contemporary capitalist society?

Certainly, Marx's account of gender and the family occasionally evinced signs of Victorian morality; however, as I have argued, this is not necessarily a fatal flaw in his work. There are a number of areas in which Marx's theory of society provides the possibility of incorporating feminist insights into Marxism to establish a unitary theory of gender and class oppression, which does not fundamentally privilege either.

One of the most important aspects of Marx's work for understanding gender and the family is Marx's dialectical method. Marx's categories came from his analysis of the empirical world, seen as dynamic and are based on social relationships rather than static ahistorical formulations. Thus, these categories could change as society changes.

This could potentially be valuable to a feminist analysis. Marx never directly addressed gendered dualisms and categories, but he leaves some room in his theory for change within these categories. This is especially true in regard to two dualisms: the

nature/culture dualism and the production/reproduction dualism. In both cases, Marx points to the historical and transitory nature of these formulations. Nature and culture are not absolute opposites: they are, instead, moments of the whole. Labor, as a necessary activity for survival, mediates humanity's relationship with nature in very specific ways, based on the particular mode of production in question. Moreover, in terms of the production-and-reproduction dualism, Marx is normally careful to note that both are necessary to humanity, but that these will take different forms based upon the technological and social development of the society in question.

Marx points to two different aspects of these categories—the historically specific elements and the more abstract characteristics that exist in every society. Thus, in terms of understanding women's relationship to these dualisms, a logical formulation within Marx's thought would be to point out that biology is certainly relevant. However, biology cannot be viewed as such outside of the social relations of a particular society. This can potentially help to avoid the biologicistic and deterministic arguments of some radical and socialist feminists who essentialize "women's nature," while at the same time avoiding relativism since, in Marx's view, the world is not completely socially constructed. Rather, biology and nature are important variables when viewed within a socially mediated framework.

This is important for another reason. While Marx's theory remains underdeveloped in terms of providing an account that includes gender as important to understanding capitalism, his categories, nonetheless, lead in the direction of a systematic critique of patriarchy as it manifests itself in capitalism since he is able to separate out the historically specific elements of patriarchy from a more general form of women's oppression, as it has existed throughout much of human history. In this sense, his categories provide resources for feminist theory, or at least areas for new dialogue, at a time when Marx's critique of capital is coming to the fore once again.

With his focus on social mediation and his emphasis on understanding particular social systems, Marx, as contemporary scholarship has demonstrated, avoided economic determinism. Certainly, economic factors play a very significant role in his thought, because they are seen as conditioning other social behavior, particularly in capitalism. However, Marx was often careful to note the reciprocal, dialectical relation between economic and social factors. As was the case with nature and culture as well as production and reproduction, economic activity and social activity are dialectical moments of the whole in a particular mode of production. In the last analysis, the two cannot be separated out completely. As Marx illustrated in his "Suicide" essay and *New York Tribune* articles, where he points to the unique ways in which economics and the specifically capitalist form of patriarchy interact to oppress women. Thus, in

these and his other writings, Marx, at least tentatively, began to discuss the interdependent relationship between class and gender without fundamentally privileging either in his analysis.

Despite the fact that not all aspects of Marx's writings on gender and the family are relevant today, some carrying the limitations of nineteenth-century thought, they offer important insights on gender and political thought. Even though Marx did not write a great deal on gender, and did not develop a systematic theory of gender and the family, it was, for him, an essential category for understanding the division of labor, production, and society in general. Marx's discussion of gender and the family extended far beyond merely including women as factory workers. Marx noted the persistence of oppression in the bourgeois family and the need to work out a new form of the family. Additionally, Marx became more and more supportive of women's demands for equality in the workplace, in unions, in the First International, and as he studied capitalism and witnessed the role of women in such important events as the Paris Commune of 1871. Despite their unpolished and fragmentary character, Marx's notes on ethnology are particularly significant, since Marx points quite directly to the historical character of the family through his selections of Morgan, Maine, and Lange. Moreover, Marx's use of dialectics is an important methodological contribution to feminism and social research in general, seeming to view gender as subject to change and development, rather than as a static concept.

Notes

1. ↪ See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press 1971), originally 1923; and Terrell Carver, *Marx & Engels: The Intellectual Relationship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).
2. ↪ Raya Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), originally 1981.
3. ↪ Heidi Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union", in Linda Nicholson, ed., *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1997), originally 1981; Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward A Feminist Historical Materialism* (London: Longman, 1983).
4. ↪ Margaret Benston, "[The Political Economy of Women's Liberation](#)," *Monthly Review* 21, no. 4 (1969): 13–27; Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Brooklyn: Petroleuse Press, 1971); Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975); Wally Secombe, "The Housewife and Her Labour under Capitalism," *New Left Review* I, no. 83 (1974): 3–24.

5. ↪ Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983).
6. ↪ Nancy Holmstrom, “A Marxist Theory of Women’s Nature,” *Ethics* 94, no. 3 (1984): 456–73.
7. ↪ Iris Young, ‘Socialist Feminism and the Limits of Dual Systems Theory,’ *Socialist Review* 10, nos. 2–3 (1980): 169–88.
8. ↪ Karl Marx, “Peuchet on Suicide,” in Eric Plaut and Kevin Anderson, eds., *Marx on Suicide* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), originally 1846.
9. ↪ Ibid, 51.
10. ↪ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 621; originally 1867–75.
11. ↪ Karl Marx in David Fernbach, ed., *The First International and After, Political Writings*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin Books. 1992), 376.
12. ↪ This is elaborated on in Heather Brown, *Marx on Gender and the Family: A Critical Study* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), chapter 5.
13. ↪ The notes on Maine are available in Karl Marx (Lawrence Krader, ed.), *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx (Studies of Morgan, Phear, Maine, Lubbock)* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum & Co., 1972) Marx’s notes on Lange are unpublished; English translations were graciously provided to the author by those working with the MEGA project.

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