

# Marxism, Human Nature, and Society

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### Assumptions about Human Nature

Assumptions about human nature lie at the root of all theories that argue for the superiority of some form of social and political order. Liberal assumptions, which form the ideological underpinnings of capitalist society, are held by their exponents to be true reflections, or interpretations of, "reality." Liberal assumptions about human nature consider the individual as primarily selfish greedy, competitive; needing to be constrained from abusing "freedom" and doing violence to others, etc. Conservative, elite theorists tend to view human beings as essentially irrational, sheep-like, apathetic, and so on.

Modern liberal-democratic theory has its roots in a Hobbesian conception of the person as primarily a possessive individual--the individual as "essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them."<sup>1</sup> "Freedom" is defined almost solely in terms of absolute freedom to own. The Liberal view of society is that

society becomes a lot of free equal individuals related to each other as proprietors of their own capacities and of what they have acquired by their exercise. Society consists of relations of exchange between proprietors. Political society becomes a calculated device for the protection of this property and for the maintenance of an orderly relation of exchange.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the essence of "human nature," in liberal theory and political discourse, is derived from assumptions about the impersonal market relations of bourgeois society.

The seventeenth century theorist Thomas Hobbes argued that in the natural condition of mankind, where there is no central authority to enforce order, life must be "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short." Hobbes assumed that humans have no desire to associate save for the necessities of market exchange government, etc.<sup>3</sup> Without the iron rule of a strong (though preferably benevolent) leader, individuals will fall into a state of war of "every man against every man."<sup>4</sup> The utilitarian theorists who succeeded Hobbes viewed the individual as essentially a utility-maximizer and an insatiable consumer.

These views are central to bourgeois economic theory, especially to the laissez-faire type preached by Milton Friedman and the Chicago school. In

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1. C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 3.

2. Macpherson, *Theory*, 3.

3. Thomas Hobbes, *Rudiments*, 2: 22-24.

4. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Penguin, 1968), 188.

*Capitalism and Freedom*, Friedman argues that "a free private enterprise exchange economy," or "competitive capitalism," is both a direct component of freedom and a necessary though not a sufficient condition of political freedom, which he defines as "the absence of coercion of a man by his fellow men."<sup>5</sup>

Again, we have the assumption that interaction with other people interferes with individual goals of acquisition, security, etc. Freedom is defined negatively--freedom of the individual from society. There is no recognition of the social nature and needs of human existence; of the social nature of production and of what is produced. This definition of "freedom," moreover, excludes the concepts of equity, and of social responsibility for those who cannot "compete" in the market.

Marxists reject this view of human nature and the "natural state" of human society. They argue that the liberal assumptions derive from, and seek to legitimize, the types of social relations that are specific to capitalist society. They do not amount, therefore, to "general," "universal" truths about human nature, but merely to a portrait of certain aspects of human behaviour that are typical of bourgeois society (e.g., possessive individualism and competitiveness).

Marx's concept of a general "human nature" encompasses humankind's common material needs, as well as the potential for free development of intellectual, creative, and social needs and capacities. These needs form the *limits* of the capitalist mode of production, that is, the limits to exploitation. At the same time, they comprise the potential of a socialist mode of production; they are the fruits of emancipation.

Marx's views about human nature are fundamental to his critique of capitalism and to his belief in a form of society that must succeed capitalism and is a truer reflection of the needs of humankind. The writings of Marx express deep compassion and anger about the human suffering created by nineteenth century industrialization and reveal his profound humanism.

Contrary to the liberal and elite views of human nature, Marx attributed to human beings "the capacity for rational understanding, for moral judgement and action, for aesthetic creation or contemplation, for the emotional activities of friendship and love."<sup>6</sup> These are viewed as ends in themselves, not simply as means to possession of goods. That is, contrary to the common teachings of bourgeois economics, the human being is not merely "a bundle of appetites seeking satisfaction," but "a bundle of conscious energies seeking to be exerted."<sup>7</sup>

However, Marx saw these human needs frustrated and degraded by the nature of social relations under capitalism. In the capitalist division of labour, the worker is "annexed for life by a limited function"--a single faculty developed at the expense of all others--"crippled...through the suppression of a whole world of productive drives and inclinations," crippled in "body and mind," and attacked "at the very roots of his life."<sup>8</sup> The worker--as an appendage of

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5. Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: university of Chicago Press, 1962).

6. C. B. Macpherson, "The Maximization of Democracy," in *Essays on Democracy*, 4.

7. Macpherson, *Essays*, 5.

8. Karl Marx, *Capital*, 469, 474, 481, 484, 614, 615.

a machine or as a non-manual functionary--is reduced by the capitalist labour process to what Marx called "a fragment of a man."<sup>9</sup> Thus, Marx viewed creativity and a variety of activities that develop all human faculties to their fullest potential as crucial human needs.

The worker was viewed by Marx as not only physically degraded by the exhausting, unhealthy conditions of her labour, but also "alienated"--from nature, from herself, and from humanity. In the capitalist labour process, the product of her labour is appropriated by the capitalist; labour power itself becomes a mere commodity. Work is no longer an autonomous, creative activity, but rather an experience of drudgery, monotony, and subordination. Marx argued that:

The possessing class and the proletarian class represent one and the same human self-alienation. But the former feels satisfied and affirmed in this self-alienation, experiences the alienation as a sign of its own power, and possesses in it the appearance of a human existence. The latter, however, feels destroyed in this alienation, seeing in it its own impotence and the reality of an inhuman existence.... [T]his class is, within depravity, an indignation against this depravity, an indignation necessarily aroused in this class by the contradiction between its *human nature* and its life-situation, which is a blatant, outright and all-embracing denial of that very nature.<sup>10</sup>

The conclusion is that alienation can only be eliminated by the destruction of the system of exploitation that creates it. Here it is important to note that Marx saw collective human action as the motive force of history. Moreover he saw technological development (or the development of the forces of production) as a potentially liberating condition for human emancipation.

What was Marx's conception of a truly emancipated society, of Communist society? A common misperception about Marxists is that they advocate some kind of totalitarian society in which the "collectivity" suffocates individual needs and expression or at least that communism inevitably leads to such a society. It is true that there is a crisis of political democracy in the countries of so-called existing socialism. However, if we look at Marx's views about the "natural" or "ideal" relationship between the individual and society, we find these ideas:

- The individual is a profoundly social being, whose needs cannot be fully satisfied without human community and interaction;- Communist society is a society "in which the full and free development of every individual forms the ruling principle."<sup>11</sup>

We also find the following argument:

Since human nature is the true community of men, by manifesting their nature men create, produce, the human community, the social entity, which is no abstract universal power opposed to the single individual, but is the essential

9. Marx, *Capital*, 523, 547, 614, 799.

10. "The Holy Family: A Critique of Critical Criticism" (1845), excerpt from the *Marx-Engels Reader*, 2d ed., Robert C. Tucker, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 133-34; emphasis added.

11. *Capital* 1: 739, 614, cf. 638.

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nature of each individual, his own activity, his own life, his own spirit, his own wealth.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover:

Freedom [in the sphere of material production] can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their *human nature*.<sup>13</sup>

Marx sees communism as "the positive abolition of private property, of human self-alienation... [and] therefore as the return of man to himself as a social, i.e., really human, being, a complete and conscious return which assimilates all the wealth of previous development."<sup>14</sup>

#### **Marxism and Feminism**

How do Marxists explain the oppression of women in our society, and what do they think the role of women should be? It is interesting that, in writing about the nature of human relations in a Communist society, Marx drew a parallel with the nature of sexual relationships--as they might ideally be, i.e., based on equality and reciprocity rather than instrumentalism and oppression. He wrote:

The immediate, natural and necessary relation of human being to human being is also the relation of man to woman.... [I]n this relation it is... revealed... the extent to which human nature has become nature for man and to which nature has become human nature for him. *From this relationship man's whole level of*

*development can be assessed.* It follows from the character of this relationship how far man has become, and has understood himself as, a species-being, a human being.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, the relations between men and women in a society are a telling measure of its development towards truly nonexploitative and "human" relations in general. Marx and Engels argued that in bourgeois society, the oppression of women--in fact the degradation of sexual relations in general--takes specific forms.

Engels argued that in the bourgeois family, the wife is an instrument of reproduction, bound by contractual obligations intended to secure the inheritance line of accumulated bourgeois property. He traces the patriarchal oppression of women to (i) the replacement of matriarchal and primitive communistic types of household structure by patriarchal structures, which accompanied the accumulation of wealth by individual males; and (ii) the destruction of small commodity production based on the household unit. This meant that, whereas

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12. Karl Marx, *Collected Works*, 3: 217.

13. *Capital* (Moscow: 1962 ed.), 3: 800; emphasis added.

14. Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, 155.

15. *Early Writings*, 154; emphasis added.

formerly women had participated in all the productive activities necessary to reproduce the household, the expropriation of small holders, the impoverishment of artisans, brought about by the Industrial Revolution, created two spheres of labour: domestic (or private) and social (or wage) labour. As the means of subsistence increasingly assumed the form of the monetary wage, unpaid domestic labour was degraded to the status of domestic servitude.

When the factories of the Industrial Revolution began to swallow up the labour of working class women and children, Engels observed a phenomenon still typical of our own times. Despite their proletarianization, working class women were not relieved of their domestic burdens.<sup>16</sup> Engels concluded that women could not be emancipated until:

- they had won full equality with men before the law;
- the proletarianization of women had removed the economic bases of monogamous marriage and the patriarchal household;
- the care and education of children had become a social responsibility.

In a Communist society, therefore, sexual relations are an open question. Perhaps monogamous relationships will continue to form--indeed, to be more fulfilling than they are in Capitalist society. The main point is that the constraints on free will--especially for women--in determining their sexual and reproductive behaviour will be removed with the abolition of private property. [Note: by the abolition of private property, Marxists are referring to the means of production, not to personal property.]

However, in the practice of the Left, many Marxists have tended to assume that the abolition of private property alone will bring about the emancipation of women and have treated so-called women's issues as secondary to the "prior" struggle of the working class in the economic sphere. In opposition to this practice, feminists have argued that the abolition of private property is not enough. Some aspects of the oppression of women (i) predate capitalism, (ii) continue to exist in the so-called existing socialist countries, and within socialist movements; and (iii) originate in the reproductive function of women and in sexual politics.

It would perhaps be useful at this point for me to distinguish between different "kinds" of feminism, which I would define roughly as follows: *Bourgeois Feminism*

Bourgeois feminism does not trace the source of women's oppression in the work place or home to structural, economic causes, or to the inherent patriarchy of social institutions, but to "attitudes" which "discriminate" against women gaining entry to certain positions. Its theme is generally that women will be "equal" or "liberated" when the legal or attitudinal barriers to their occupying positions currently held by men are removed. So, for example, bourgeois feminists would approve of women's demands to become military aircraft pilots or bank executives. Their role models might include such women as Indira Gandhi or Margaret Thatcher. The emphasis, in other words, is not on transforming society, but on gaining access to the higher echelons of *existing* institutions.

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16. Engels, *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, 744.

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### **Radical Feminism**

Radical feminists tend to trace the sources of women's oppression to a sexual power struggle between men and women. They argue that male dominance stems from men's control over biological reproduction-- reinforced through such institutions as the patriarchal family, certain religious strictures, the medical profession, and various aspects of the State (e.g., criminal law on abortion; lack of child care funding; absence of other economic and legal reforms necessary for women to be independent of the nuclear family, etc.). The key struggles of radical feminists are to prevent sexual violence (rape, wife-beating, pornography) and to assert women's autonomy over all decisions affecting their reproductive lives (free access to abortion, birth control, midwifery, the renaissance of women's health networks). The mode of struggle typical of radical feminists is to organize women separately and to define their concerns as "women's issues."

### **Socialist/Marxist Feminism**

In my view, it is not possible to be a Marxist without being a feminist; that is, without acknowledging the unique oppression suffered by women historically and under capitalism, and without making the sexual emancipation of women a crucial part of our definition of socialism. Marxists are engaged in the struggles outlined above.

However, where Socialist Marxist feminists differ from the radical feminists is in choosing to emphasize the social and economic causes of the sexual oppression of women *and men*. In our every day experience as women, it is easy to perceive the source of all evil as being "men," especially if one works at a halfway house for battered wives or a sexual assault crisis centre. This is the "front line" in an intensely painful and personal struggle. But it is also necessary to have a way of understanding where sexual attitudes--sexism, misogyny, female submissiveness--come from; to see men and children also as victims of sexism in our society.

Issues that we commonly hear described as "women's issues" are not of concern solely to women. Caring for children is a social responsibility; the right of the man to a nurturing role is a social issue; relationships based on equality and reciprocity are an essential need of both women and men.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, Marxists have tried to determine to what extent the causes of sexual oppression are "material," i.e., inherent in the system of property ownership and the social relations that underpin it, and how they might be eliminated in a socialist society. They have argued that

- the sexual division of labour benefits capital by (i) cheapening the subsistence wage (through unpaid domestic labour); (ii) dividing the working class along sexual lines (strikebreaking, sexist ideology, de-skilling); (iii) providing a pool of cheap surplus labour for periods of capitalist expansion, which can be

pushed back into the "private" sphere in downturns (hence the term "last hired, first fired"); and (iv) perpetuating a "consumer society" based on a mythology of the nuclear family;

17. See note 15.

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- capital and the state have collaborated in controlling the fertility of women in accordance with the demands of the labour market (just as it controls, for example, the rate and type of immigration) through access to daycare, liberalization or restriction of contraceptive use, abortion, and child bonuses.

Marxists have, therefore, tended to focus organizing efforts on women in the work place, rather than supporting autonomous, interclass women's organizations.

To return to the question of the relationship between Marxism and feminism first, it must be said that feminism has radically transformed Marxist praxis in the last few decades. Women working in left organizations developed a critique of the practice of their male colleagues, which had far-reaching consequences. The women argued that

- gender hierarchies had been reproduced instead of challenged- that there was no real attempt to transform gender relations within left organizations themselves. Women were still doing the typing, photocopying, still making the coffee, while men dominated decision-making. There was still sexist behaviour;

- the structure and practices of left parties were undemocratic, elitist, and exclusive, rather than consensual and encouraging discussion;

- relationships with people "outside" the organization were viewed instrumentally, in relation to the objectives of the organization and its preconceived political programme. Sectarianism and dogmatism were intimidating to the "uninitiated" and produced sterility of debate;

- conception of the struggle was in militaristic, tactical terms, instead of linkage politics and real interest in cooperating with and learning from autonomous movements;

- the specific forms of women's oppression were not being adequately acknowledged or acted upon, due to the "workerist" orientation of left organizations--the stereotypical conception of the "worker" (the revolutionary subject) as blue-collar and male. This also disregarded the significant role of women in the workforce.

In response to their experience of hierarchical, male-dominated left organizations, women emphasized that "the personal is political." That is, how do we envisage socialist human relations? How do we change "society" if we cannot first transform ourselves?

These are some of the criticisms that women levelled at left organizations beginning in the late sixties. In some cases the internal conflict contributed to the break-up of organizations; certainly many women left their former political "homes" and transferred their energies to the "women's movement." To some extent, radical feminism is a legacy of this experience of women with left parties and groupings.

However, feminism has also profoundly democratized socialist praxis and has been the impetus for a rethinking of internal forms of organization, interpersonal relations, and the mode of politics of the Left.