

Kept Down By the Man, Damn the Man: The Figurative and Literal Alienation of Women

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Abstract: While Feminism and Marxism each promote revolution in the name of equality, Feminist struggle is dismissed by Marxism. As workers, women face the capitalist narrative, but women's alienation is deeper than mere Marxist alienation. Women face the additional narrative of the patriarchy. This paper seeks to show that true Marxist revolution is impossible unless it is preceded by a Feminist revolution that breaks gender and sexual stigmas.

Preface

Sandra Cisneros remarks, “My feminism is humanism, with the weakest being those who I represent, and that includes many beings and life forms, including some men.”¹ Feminism and Marxism both call for the end of alienation and a reconstruction of society based around liberation. However, there exists a fine line between the two. For feminism, it is the decomposition of the patriarchal society ending in universal gender equality; for Marxism, it is the withering away of the

¹ Cisneros, S. Interview by M-A Oliver-Rotger [Personal Interview]. *Interviews & Readings*, University of Minnesota. January/February 2000. <http://voices.cla.umn.edu/readings/cisneros_sandra.html>.



capitalist state, ending in liberation in the form of species being. Marxism does not include feminism in its revolution, therefore, the latter must have its own revolution to achieve true human liberation prior to joining the fight for class equality.

This paper will explore the nature of exploitation through Marxist and Feminist oeuvres and economic data. It will analyze the female role in the workplace, the home, and in the overall male narrative. One will see that the Marxist makes a case for woman as a commodity rather than as a member of a universal class involved in economic struggle, thus weakening claims of commonality between Marxism and Feminism. Ultimately, the paper will address and promote the concept of *feminist* liberation as *universal* liberation through the deconstruction of the patriarchal narrative and call for societal reconstruction

I. The Devil in the Details

The Feminist literature is vast, from Wollstonecraft to Hartmann. Despite minor differences in rhetoric and time, it can be condensed into one theme: the universal abolishment of gender classes.² Feminism, as a complete theory, “offers a moral vision of women, in all their diversity, and [a vision] of social justice [...] while enabling...] men and women to re-experience and re-form themselves.”³ Common misconceptions argue that feminism focuses solely on the rights of women. This idea is false; it focuses on the use of *human* rights to eradicate stigmas associated with all genders and sexualities, essentially devising a system *sans* classifications based on constructed terms.

This desire to deconstruct society for the betterment of human rights is also seen in Marxist literature. Theoretically, Marxism is constructed around and committed to the material world.⁴ Marx views this movement as the “positive abolition of private property, of human self-alienation, and thus the real appropriation

² Mary Wollstonecraft, “A Vindication of the Rights of Women” in *Dogmas and Dreams: A Reader In Modern Political Ideologies* (3rd), ed. Nancy Love (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 2005): 481-488 and Heidi Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union” in *Dogmas and Dreams*, 497-516.

³ Love, ed. *Dogmas and Dreams*, 471.

⁴ While Marxism is typically synonymous with socialism and communism, I am referring to the theory as “Marxism” to alleviate confusion with the practical application rather than the theoretical adaptation, which is the focus of the paper.

of human nature through and for man.”⁵ Whoever controls the means of production and natural resources controls the material narrative as materialism precedes abstraction. In other words, because the capitalist has fundamental control, the narrative (art, economics, law, politics, philosophy; i.e. culture) is tailored to benefit that particular class. For Marx, alienation is brought on by exploitation born from the dehumanized experience. The worker becomes the very commodity s/he produces. Consequently, such dehumanization drives the worker to revolt against the capitalist narrative.

The concept of a society in the throes of privileged elite is no stranger in feminist theory either. Feminine notions and the construction of the ‘woman’ are bound to a sexual identity created by a patriarchal narrative where one need only replace Marx’s bourgeoisie with the patriarch to see the similarities. Women’s roles dictated throughout history follow the Hegelian evolution of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis because they must; their dialectic is that of sex domination. Simone de Beauvoir states, “One is not born woman, one becomes one.”⁶ One is born a human, void of any class designation whether on account of gender, sex, or economic class and is then assigned a role determined by a society governed by the more powerful in each of those distinctions. Wollstonecraft notes the power dynamic never shifts in favor of women: before marriage, it is a woman’s job to please men and afterwards, it is no different—willingly conforming to the standards set by men.⁷ This willingness, however, is born from the male narrative.

At first glance, the Marxist worker and the woman are presented in similar situations: alienated, exploited, and trapped. Yet, it is the female who battles two narratives:

[O]nce workers have the franchise and the full right to organize collectively and once ascriptive barriers to equal opportunity have been eliminated, class oppression would disappear. Once

⁵ Karl Marx and Eugene Kamenka, ed., *The Portable Karl Marx* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1983): 149.

⁶ Brigid Haines, “Beyond Patriarchy: Marxism, Feminism, and Elfriede Jelinek’s “die Liebhaberinnen,” *The Modern Language Review* 92.3 (1997): 643.

⁷ Wollstonecraft, “A Vindication of the Rights of Women,” 483.



women are accorded full citizenship and reproductive rights and once antidiscrimination procedures are firmly in place, gender oppression would be eliminated.⁸

Where Marx's *economic* classes take center stage, feminism seeks to "[eliminate] power and welfare differentials between men and women."⁹ When these two forms of oppression synthesize, they create a degree of alienation made difficult to resist. Levins notes that during the 1940s, "male-dominated unions and parties saw women in the workforce as a threat to men's employment and called for a family wage that would allow a man to keep 'his' woman and children."¹⁰ A family wage would keep women at relatively lower levels. Almost seventy years later, the World Bank reports for the United States, in 2006, 31% of the employees in the industrial sector were male and only 9% were female.¹¹ In that same year, overall labor participation displayed similar contrasts: women held 59% of all labor participation, men held 73%. The large statistical discrepancies suggest there is some force seemingly greater than the Smithsonian "Invisible Hand" at work.

II. The Commoditized Woman

Not only is the woman property of the capitalist system, she is also bound to the familial aspect of society. There must not only be production in the workforce, but the woman must also be responsible for reproduction, transcending to a greater duty of buttressing home life.¹² By being perceived as property, women, "like commodities[,] are valued according to an exterior system of value. This places them in competition with each other, subjects them to a schism between private and social use, and renders them liable to the fetishization as a manifestation

⁸ Erik O. Wright, "Explanation and Emancipation in Marxism and Feminism," *Sociological Theory* 11.1 (1993): 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁰ Richard Levins, "Continuing Sources of Marxism Looking for the Movement as a Whole," *Monthly Review* 62.8 (2011): 36.

¹¹ Industry, or rather the manufacturing sector, is held to the light here rather than the agriculture or services sector because of its stigma of masculinity. Furthermore, this specific sector has historical breadth unlike the services sector, and therefore functions as a controlled experiment allowing for one to trace the progress made by gender.

¹² Levin, "Continuing Sources of Marxism," 37.

of the power of the phallus.”¹³ The more the woman produces, the more commoditized she becomes, though in a different sense than Marx’s worker who becomes inorganically alienated from material creation.

For a woman to be “valuable,” she must adhere to a set of standards and beliefs determined by society. If one looks at pop culture, one can see the physical result and consequences of this conformity to the male generated beliefs. During Halloween, costume choices for women are limited to hyper-sexualized outfits: the cop, the nurse, the nun, the teacher. The woman is bound to a sexual identity cultivated by society’s demands to highlight the physical, most appealing aspect of a woman. Is it pure irony that an estimated 90% of people with eating disorders are women and only 10% are men?¹⁴ A woman’s potential is judged by how well she fits the fantasy projected onto her. It is no surprise then that socio-cultural peer pressure has begun to “promote body image [...] and eating disturbances in young women.”¹⁵ In responding to increasing rates of eating disorders, incidences of anorexia nervosa “in the UK has been estimated to up to 11 new cases per 100,000 persons per year and that bulimia nervosa up to 18 new cases.”¹⁶ Moreover, the empirical evidence similarly supports “the hypothesis that individuals trade off health against self image.”¹⁷ To be beautiful, one must adapt to how society wants to define “beauty.” The pressure on women (and men) to meet the standards is physically intense and psychologically oppressive.

Women do not exist solely for themselves. They are warped into products, deemed valuable only for social use and are ends in themselves.¹⁸ Their unique struggle is combined with the larger economic struggle. There, they become the very example of commoditization Marxism claims to fight against. Marx argues that women:

¹³ Haines, “Beyond Patriarchy,” 646.

¹⁴ Joan Costa-Font and Mirela Jofre-Bonet, “Body Image and Food Disorders: Evidence from a Sample of European Women,” *CESifo Working Paper No. 2412* (2008): 4.

¹⁵ Eric Stice, Jennifer Maxfield, and Tony Wells, “Adverse Effects of Social Pressure to be Thin on Young Women: An Experimental Investigation of the Effects of ‘Fat Talk,’” *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 34.1 (2003): 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁷ Costa-ont and Jofre-Bonet, “Body Image and Food Disorders,” 20.

¹⁸ Marx and Kamenka, *The Portable Karl Marx*, 567.



[B]ecome communal and common property [...they] are to pass from marriage to universal prostitution, so the whole world of wealth [...] is to pass from the relation of exclusive marriage with the private owner to the realization of universal prostitution with the community.¹⁹

Commoditized as individuals, the implications are far worse and more complex than the devaluation suffered by male workers. To use women in explaining a shift from private property to communal utility is to establish a “sex-blind” system that disadvantageously exploits one group under the farce of capitalism.²⁰ Hence, they are comparable to other forms of property in the final synthesis: universally communal. Unfortunately, the position men hold within both the patriarch and in capitalism “prevent them from recognizing both human needs for [...] growth and the potential for meeting those needs in a nonhierarchical, nonpatriarchal society.”²¹

Though responsible for producing publically and reproducing privately, a woman’s value-added labor is withheld as if constrained by a Braudellian bell jar defined by her biological disposition. Marx’s worker is disillusioned by the capitalist’s push to accept religion as a “veil of ignorance,” so too is institutionalized marriage. Women “have been successfully interpellated by the ideology of love and marriage perpetuated by the media.”²² Moreover, “women’s desire[s] [...] are] simply left unfigured and a woman’s attractiveness [is] defined solely in terms of her [cleanliness] and [domesticity].”²³ By being labeled as a ‘good housewife,’ her desire becomes crafted by the narrative into wanting a clean house and a nuclear family—symbols of her husband’s success and what has become the American dream. In this family, children are reared by women and learn their places in the gender hierarchy as well.²⁴ Through a reinforcing cycle children are predestined to know where they stand in the world outside of the home specifically because of what is constructed inside of it. A 2009 Pew research poll reveals that while the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁰ Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism,” 499.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 513.

²² *Ibid.*, 648.

²³ *Ibid.*, 653.

²⁴ Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism,” 503.

percentage of women in the U.S. labor force has grown to almost half of the total U.S. labor force, “[l]arge majorities of Americans believe that the ideal situation for both mother and child is that a mother with young children does not hold a full-time job.”²⁵ Not surprisingly, “42% say what’s best is if the mother doesn’t work at all.” While significant progress has been made since Levins’ 1940s assessment, there is still much to be accomplished.

It is crucial to note that, as mentioned earlier, men are also subject to the narrative and should not be viewed as an “enemy.” It is the tradition set in motion that has made them superior that is the true culprit. Because men create their own narrative, they are conformed to a path dependency of dogmatized masculinity. Any deviation creates tension within the structure. By not following the “historical” path, they are not truly men. When this happens, they too are dehumanized in the same fashion as women and have thus become victims to their own narrative. This can be seen in the case of homosexuality today. Friedan claims that “men will only be truly liberated, to love women and to fully be themselves, when women are liberated to be full people.”²⁶ Until then, men will have to bear the consequences of their historical burden displaced on women. Men create norms which they too must follow to be socially accepted. Such pressures drive men to compensate for masculinity by exploiting those inferior, particularly females. However, it is unnatural to have relations built on patriarchal ideas alone—constraining the flourishing of the human collective. Where gender is constructed, class is constructed obliviously. This disjuncture leads to false happiness.²⁷

III. Deconstructing the Patriarchy

With such dissimilarities, one must ask if there is hope for a revolution encompassing both capitalism and patriarchy. To answer this, one must first address Marx’s materialism: is it a woman’s physiology that places her at a disadvantage or something more? Feminists are not calling for men to have the ability to birth children. In that regard, biology cannot be changed. Obstacles are “located primarily

²⁵ “The Harried Life of the Working Mother,” *Pew Research Center* (2009). <<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2009/10/01/the-harried-life-of-the-working-mother/>>.

²⁶ Betty Friedan, “Our Revolution is Unique,” in *Dogmas and Dreams*, ed. Nancy Love (Washington D.C.: CQ Press): 493.

²⁷ Herbert Marcuse, “Marxism and Feminism,” *Differences* 17.1 (2006): 503



in cultural and sexual practices that shape the formation of deeply footed gendered subjectivities or are located mainly in economic and political institutions of power and privilege.”²⁸ Culture does not imply biology, rendering biological materialism irrelevant. The notion that the penis is mightier than the uterus directly influences societal attitudes.

In considering a reconstruction of society, one needs to focus on compelling “reality principles” that project gender and sexual equality across the board. Marcuse defines reality principles as “the sum total of the norms and values that govern behavior in an established society, embodied in its institutions, relationships, etc.”²⁹ When reality principles are aimed at addressing issues collectively rather than individually, they promote universal humanism and social cohesiveness. The rub is that the goal is to transcend merely attaining the same rights as men. This situation parallels Marx’s “Jewish Question” critique. Here, Marx criticizes the Jew for seeking emancipation solely on the basis of being a Jew. As long as the state remains Christian and the Jew remains Jewish, there can be no equal emancipation.³⁰ This materialism is a product of the material reality.

To be free is to make full conscious choices uninfluenced by male narratives. When accomplished, society will follow suit and there will be human liberation. Men will be liberated as they will be able to consciously make their own choices, not influenced by stigmas against their sex and be able to interact with women on an egalitarian level. In order for this to happen they must share in decisions “of government, of politics, of the church—not just to cook the church supper; [...] not to look up the zip codes and address envelopes; [...] they must be able to] make some of the executive decisions.”³¹ This is not true just for business decisions but personal ones as well. A woman must decide if she wants to be a mother, how she will raise her children, and how she will be seen in public: as a person, not as a woman on the arm of a man.

²⁸ Wright, “Explanation and Emancipation,” 43.

²⁹ Marcuse, “Marxism and Feminism,” 148.

³⁰ Marx and Kamenka, *The Portable Karl Marx*, 97.

³¹ Friedan, “Our Revolution is Unique,” 492.

To advance into a truly Feminist society, one must be aware that “primary aggressiveness would persist, as it would in any form of society, but it may well lose the specifically masculine quality of domination and exploitation.”³² One caveat is that the revolution *contra* capitalism raises issues that were seen in the “Jewish Question.” The worker specifically demands economic emancipation, though it impacts the relationship with the self, other men, and his nature. Nowhere does it emancipate him from the narrative he created, and nowhere does it emancipate women from either narrative directly.

When the patriarch is deconstructed, there is universal egalitarianism on all fronts. Marcuse remarks:

[E]quality is not yet freedom. Only as an equal economic and political subject can the woman claim a leading role in the radical reconstruction of society. But beyond equality, liberation subverts the established hierarchy of needs—a subversion of values and norms that would make for the emergence of a society governed by a new Reality Principle.³³

This is precisely the focus of feminism. Just as the existence of religion is a defect for Marx, the degeneration of women is a defect to the existence of democracy. Simply conforming might create equality, but it does not create freedom. If the Reality Principle can be reconstructed so that materialism is addressed only in terms of social construction rather than biology, this still ignores the political economy where one is oppressed by the capitalist system. Due to labor being the sole entity the worker has to provide on account of their nature and self, labor must be considered in a way that is inclusive. Lazzarato redefines Marxist labor as the “activity that is constitutive of the world. Labour is not a simple, determinate economic activity but rather praxis—that is the production of the world and the self, a generic activity [...] of human beings in general.”³⁴ With gender and societal roles

³² Marcuse, “Marxism and Feminism,” 154.

³³ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁴ Antonella Corsani and Timothy S. Murphy, “Beyond the Myth of Woman: The Becoming-Transfeminist of (post) Marxism,” *Substance* 36.1 (2007): 120.



distinguished, the divisions between building a home, reproduction, and formal labor are so particular to men and women that labor becomes multidimensional, applying to all individuals.

Summarily, oppression is not a static phenomenon. Materially, true feminism does not call for a biological change, as that is not true change, and categorically upends the call for universal human rights. Wright claims that:

At the close of the twentieth century, second-wave feminism envisions a future that ranges from complete equality of rights between men and women to the elimination of all gender inequalities in power and welfare [...]. No feminists imagine that male domination in even vestigial form is essential for social life. Many Marxists, on the other hand, have come to doubt the feasibility of the most egalitarian forms of their historic emancipatory class project, partially as a result of the failures of authoritarian state socialist systems and partially as a result of theoretical developments within Marxism itself.³⁵

He is false. The deconstruction of the patriarch will have more than socio-economic changes. If the material reality is held by a people who do not associate with sex-identified stereotypes, there are infinite ways to improve society. If history has bred male dominance and capitalism, with social change geared at viewing people not as “man” or “woman” but truly as people, there could be an entire reconstruction of the material reality that does not value one group over another. Feminism does not call for a matriarchal society where the tables are turned and the men become the oppressed. It calls for the destruction of *all* gender and sex affiliated bonds to move onto a level where capitalism can be overcome by all human beings. Hartmann adds that, “men have long struggled *against* capital, women know what to struggle *for*.”³⁶ Perhaps the only true commonality to be found within the two ideologies is that there are more than chains to be lost: there are worlds to be rewritten. ❖

³⁵ Wright, “Explanation and Emancipation,” 45.

³⁴ Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism,” 513.