

From Eugene, Los Angeles

MARX'S CONCEPT OF WOMAN, 1843-1883, AND TODAY

Introduction

"The direct, natural, necessary relationship of human being to human being is the relationship of man to woman ... Consequently, in it is revealed to what degree the natural behavior of man has become human, or to what degree the human essence has become his natural essence, to what degree his human nature has become his nature." These words were penned by Marx in 1844 as he broke with bourgeois society and began the 40-year-long journey that encompasses the creation of his philosophy of revolution.

That journey was first a thoroughgoing critique of bourgeois society -- of its alienated labor, of its property forms, of its state forms of rule, of its religion, its culture, its form of the family; indeed, of its very form of thought. Such a critique revolved around Marx's discernment and analysis of the particular form of production that distinguished capitalism from all previous societies and their modes of production -- the commodity form of production with labor power, or abstract labor, as the supreme commodity.

Second, Marx's philosophy of revolution was as well a critique of all those groups, parties, tendencies, who wished to overthrow bourgeois society, but who did not in fact break in a total way with the bourgeois form of thought and the bourgeois form of production. In the early years it was a critique of the Young Hegelians, and of the utopian socialists, as well as the vulgar communists and petty-bourgeois anarchists. Later it became a critique of those who claimed to be Marxists, such as Lassalle, but who thought they could make deals with the ruling powers and construct socialism "for" the workers. Finally it became a critique of those socialists at Gotha, 1875, whose party program claimed an allegiance to Marx, but which in reality would lead to the reformism of the Second International.

Third, Marx's philosophy of revolution, in distinction from those whom he criticized, had been welded together, indeed, created together, with what he would term the "new passions and new forces" for the reconstruction of society. Marx spoke of the working class having a world to gain. It was as well the black struggles in America at the time of the Civil War, and to which we will return briefly. It was what today we would call the Third World, as Marx hailed such events as the Taiping Rebellion in China in the 1850s as against what he called the order mongering powers of the West.

And it was women. Their exploitation in bourgeois society -- subjugation in marriage, use as labor power in capitalist production. And their revolt -- as members of the First International, as fighters in the Paris Commune.

Fourth, Marx, in putting forth his critique of bourgeois society, his critique of its opponents' incomplete solutions, in his singling out of those subjects of revolution -- workers, minorities, oppressed nations, women -- who would overcome capitalism's exploitation, its dehumanization -- in doing all this, Marx arrives at his vision of a new human society. He does so not as a plan from above, but in making explicit what has been implicit within humanity's own fight for freedom. He speaks of "a thoroughgoing naturalism or humanism," and of "human power

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which is its own end," and of "freely associated labor," and of "the end of humanity's pre-history," and of "the universality of needs, capacities, enjoyments, productive powers, etc. of individuals, produced in universal exchange" where humanity "is in the absolute movement of becoming."

In putting forth this vision of a new human society as he critiques the old, it is to the relationship of man/woman that Marx is drawn throughout his 40 years. What we wish to do in this presentation is look at Marx's creation of and elaboration of a philosophy of revolution in relation to his view of the woman question.

Though there was feminism in Marx's day, there was not a women's movement on the same level as we see it today. And we are not trying to say that Marx was a feminist. But we do want to show that so total was Marx's view of a new society as new human relations, and so concrete was his critique of bourgeois society's dehumanization of all relationships, that Marx did leave us with many points of departure on the woman question, on man/woman relations.

Let's touch on several of them -- first from the 1840s, then in Marx's creation and development of Capital, and finally at the very end of his life in his Ethnological Notebooks.

I. The 1840s -- "Private Property and Communism" and "The Communist Manifesto"

We want to begin with Marx's Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, specifically the essay entitled "Private Property and Communism." Here Marx developed a critique of bourgeois society which was so enamored with private property: "Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that any kind of object is ours only when we have it, i.e., when it exists for us as capital, or when we possess it directly -- eat it, drink it, wear it, live in it, etc. -- in short, use it. But from the point of view of private property, all these direct forms of possession, in their turn, exist only as means to life; and the life to which these serve as means is the life of private property -- labor and capitalization."

Marx also attacked what he called crude or vulgar communists who wanted to universalize this sense of possession -- or reduce the question of human freedom to the question of universal possession. It is here where Marx raised the question of women in bourgeois society and asked would they be any more free if they became not private property, but the universal property of vulgar communism: "The relation of private property remains the relation of the community to the world of things. Finally, this movement of counterposing universal private property to private property is expressed in the animal form that marriage (which of course is a form of exclusive private property) is counterposed to having women in common. Hence the woman becomes communal and common property. We might say that this idea of communal women expresses the secret of this quite vulgar and unthinking communism. In the same way that the woman is to abandon marriage for general prostitution, so the whole world of wealth, that is, the material essence of man, goes from the relation of exclusive marriage with the private property owner for the relation of universal prostitution with the community."

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In the "Communist Manifesto" Marx continued with this theme when he showed that it is bourgeois society which views women as a "mere instrument of production," and has in fact practiced a "community of women," torn asunder family ties of the proletarians, made children articles of commerce and instruments of labor, concluding that, "the abolition of the present system of production must bring with it the abolition of the community of women springing from that system, i.e. of prostitution both public and private."

In returning to the Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts, we see that Marx's vision is far away from both bourgeois society and any vulgar community of women: "We should especially avoid re-establishing society, as an abstraction, opposed to the individual. The individual is the social entity."

Marx called for: "The positive transcendence of private property, i.e. the sensuous appropriation of human essence and living, of material things created by and for man, is to be conceived not only in the sense of direct, one-sided enjoyment, nor only in the sense of possession, a sense of having. Man appropriates himself as an all-sided essence in an all-sided way; hence, as a whole man. Each of his human relations of the world -- seeing, hearing, smell, taste, feeling, thought, perception, experience, wishing, activity, loving -- in short all organs, are in their objective relation or in their relation to the object, the appropriation of it. The appropriation of human actuality, its relation to the object, is the affirmation of human activity."

II. Marx's CAPITAL, the First International, and the Paris Commune

Marx's greatest work, Capital, has far too often been reduced to "discerning the law of motion of capitalist society" without realizing that such a discernment is not alone economic analysis. Rather, each economic category that Marx created was a human category -- yes, of capitalism's exploitation, but as well a category of labor's revolt and quest for universality. That quest for universality involved all the human forces for freedom. Thus, the very structure of Capital was transformed in the 1860s under the impact of the Civil War in the U.S., the black fight for freedom in America and the subsequent fight for the eight-hour day. Marx follows the whole period from John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry to the abolitionists' speeches, to the necessity to have black regiments in the army. In Capital he writes, "In the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded." And he proceeds to create an entire chapter on the fight for a shorter working day as the fight for the eight-hour day spread.

The same specificity of Marx's analysis held forth for working women. It is in the chapter entitled "Machinery and Large-Scale Industry" that Marx wrote of the dissolution of the old family, of the conditions women face in different industries: "However terrible and disgusting the dissolution of the old family ties within the capitalist system may appear, large-scale industry, by assigning an important part in socially organized processes of production, outside the sphere of the domestic economy, to women, young persons, and children of both sexes, does nevertheless create a new economic foundation

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for a higher form of the family and of relations between the sexes. It is of course just as absurd to regard the Christian-Germanic form of the family as absolute and final as it would have been in the case of the ancient Roman, the ancient Greek or the Oriental forms, which, moreover, form a series in historical development. It is also obvious that the fact that the collective working group is composed of individuals of both sexes and all ages must under the appropriate conditions turn into a source of humane development, although in its spontaneously developed, brutal, capitalist form, the system works in the opposite direction, and becomes a pestiferous source of corruption and slavery, since here the worker exists for the process of production, and not the process of production for the worker."

He looked at what women face in everything from the sorting of rags where they contact small pox and other infectious diseases, to tile and brick making, to the domestic industry -- here the lace workers -- where 140,000 women and children worked, and where the rate of tuberculosis among women lace workers, 17 to 24, rose to one in eight in 1861. He wrote of the transition from Modern manufacture and Domestic Industry to Large-Scale Industry as follows: "The cheapening of labor-power, by sheer-abuse of the labor of women and children, by sheer robbery of every normal condition needed for working and living, and by sheer brutality of over-work and night-work finally comes up against certain insuperable natural obstacles. This is also true of the cheapening of commodities, and of capitalist exploitation in general, which rests on these foundations. When this point has at last been reached -- and this takes many years -- the hour has struck for the introduction of machinery, and for a thenceforth rapid transformation of the scattered domestic industries, as well as the manufactures, into factory industries."

Marx has here spoken of the wearing apparel industry and its transformation into large scale production. More machinery is introduced: "The raw material for this labor, either in its raw shape or already semi-fabricated, is supplied by large-scale industry, and the mass of cheap human material consists of the individuals 'set free' by large-scale industry and agriculture ... The hour of the machine has struck ... Children who are too young are removed. The wages of those who work with machines rises compared with that of the domestic workers, many of whom belong among the 'poorest of the poor.' The wage of the better situated handicraftsmen sinks, however, since the machine is in competition with them. The new machine-minders are exclusively girls and young women. With the help of mechanical force, they destroy the monopoly that male labor had of the heavier work, and they drive off from the lighter work numbers of old women and very young children. The overpowering competition crushes the weakest manual workers. The fearful increase in death from starvation during the last ten years in London runs parallel with the extension of machine sewing. The new female workers turn the machines by hand and foot, or by hand alone, sometimes sitting, sometimes standing, according to the weight, size and special make of the machine, and expend a great deal of labor-power."

There can be no doubt that Marx, in describing the lot of the working force under capitalism, spoke of working women as well as working men.

It was during this period as well that Marx helped to found and give direction to the First International. Although named the International Workingmen's

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association, it not only stood for "equal rights", but had among its leaders on the General Council, Mme. Harriet Lamm. She was a lawyer and publisher. Her journal, the Secular Chronicle, published Marx's writings when others refused to do so.

During the life of the International Marx had proposed women's sections. When the International went under, and Marx spoke about the necessity of going lower and deeper into the proletariat, it was his daughter Eleanor who began in the East End of London to build an organization of unskilled workers, with women's locals.

Marx in his writings and in his activities brought forth both the exploitation of capitalism and the revolt of the masses. Nowhere is it done in a more profound way than in his writing on the Paris Commune of 1871, the Commune which led to Marx's rewriting of the "Fetishism of Commodities" section of Capital, in its pivotal chapter one. When Marx describes the revolt of the Communards, it is a revolt of women as well as men, as can be seen in the magnificent book The Women Incendiaries by Edith Thomas, which describes in great detail the role of women in the Commune. Organizations such as the Society for the Defense of Paris and the Aid to the Wounded -- the most socialist organization of the Commune -- are described.

Marx both in his indirect participation in the Commune, and in his report of the Commune, caught the role of women. During the Commune he asked Elizabeth Dimitriev to go to Paris and organize a section of women in the First International. And just two days after the Commune fell, when Marx made his address to the First International as The Civil War in France, he wrote as follows: "the real women of Paris showed again at the surface -- heroic, noble and devoted, like the women of antiquity. Working, thinking, fighting, bleeding Paris."

III. The ETHNOLOGICAL NOTEBOOKS: Origins and the Man/Woman Relation

Marx's final writings, written in 1880-82, and only published in the last few years, were his ethnological notebooks. There, at the very end of his life, Marx studied the newly emerging science of anthropology and looked anew at man/woman relations in the origins of class society. Before the publication of these notebooks in the 1970s, it had been claimed -- and indeed it is still accepted by many socialist-feminists -- that Engels' Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State was Marx's conception as well. But what the ethnological notebooks of Marx clearly show is that neither in facts, nor most crucially in methodology, does Origin of the Family flow from Marx.

Engels, basing himself on Morgan's Ancient Society, saw primitive communism as an antecedent of post-capitalist classless society. Further, he saw the class society that came after primitive communism as tied very closely with the switch from matriarchal to patriarchal society, with the male-dominated family, with, to use Engels' expression, "the world historic defeat of the female sex." All of this has served to open up an uncritical view of both primitive communism and the role of man/woman relations.

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Marx in contrast had a very different view of what was primitive communism. He too based himself in part on Morgan's Ancient Society, excerpting it and commenting on it for some 140 pages, but his attitude was neither one with Morgan's, nor, more importantly, one with Engels. In Marx: (1) The social and sexual division of labor were not made synonymous. Though at first in The German Ideology, Marx had used the expression that the first division of labor was sexual, he had rejected it long before the 1850s, and now stressed the fact that it was not the family, but other forms of organization of society as well, that expressed the social division of society. Engels, who had Marx's Ethnological Notebooks before him, failed to express Marx's change of position.

(2) Though the family was studied and commented upon, it did not become the universal pathway to a class society that Engels tried to make it. For Marx there were the differences in relations between chief and ranks, emergence of conflict within. (3) Primitive communism was not uncritically accepted as classless; rather, for Marx, the origins of class society and the transitions to class society were to be found within primitive communism and not something which occurred only after. Primitive communism had its dualities and thus the origins of class society were not alone in the question of the family assuming a patriarchal form after primitive communism.

Naturally Marx was opposed to the modern family which he saw as containing within it in embryo not only slavery but serfdom, since from the beginning it is connected with agricultural service. But for Marx the family was not the representative of the social division of labor, the pathway to class society. Rather, it was one of the pathways, one of the manifestations of the development toward a class society.

What I think becomes clear when you take the totality of Marx, from 1844 and the Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts to the 1850-52 Ethnological Notebooks, is that, in contrast to many others, it was not the division of man/woman which Marx concentrated on, though he certainly recognized it. Rather, for Marx, it was the relation of man/woman which was so deep. So deep that it compelled him time and again to return to that relationship.

Because Marx did dig into that relationship as integral to his world view, and because women's liberation as a movement is today an undeniable revolutionary force, the unity of Marxism and feminism is not an external imposition, but a movement that comes from within. In 1980 genuine Marxism has feminism integral to it, and genuine feminism finds its most critical, that is, revolutionary expression, within Marxism.

IV. The Todayness of Marx's Concept of Woman

It is no accident that it is our own age which has rediscovered the humanism of Marx, and his specificity on woman. Thus, Simone de Beauvoir felt compelled to end her Second Sex precisely with a quote from the young Marx of the Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts on the man/woman relationship.

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But it is most especially to another woman philosopher, Raya Dunayevskaya, the founder of Marxist-humanism in the United States, that we are indebted for much of our understanding of Marx not alone as economist or historian, but as a creator of a whole new continent of thought, (see "Marx's New Continent of Thought" in her Philosophy and Revolution), with humanity at its center. It is she who has singled out the humanism of Marxism, translating the Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 into English (see Marxism and Freedom), and who has developed most explicitly the relation of Marx's philosophy of revolution and women's liberation. Most recently she has shown the man/woman relation in Marx not alone in the 1844 writings, but in these Ethnological Notebooks we spoke of.

Her work on Marx's relation to the woman question is not a matter of searching for the proper quote from Marx. Instead her concern is with the revolutions-to-be and how to prepare for them in a manner that will make sure we move to genuine social transformation, a total uprooting and not face sexism or racism or class exploitation after the revolution. She is asking us to consider the most fundamental of questions -- Can the women's Liberation Movement become subject of revolution in its fullness, as reason as well as force, by comprehending Marx's new continent of thought as ground for women's liberation's further development. She argues that within Marx's philosophy of liberation there is an intercommunication of humanity's fight for freedom historically with our age, with our own revolutionary subjectivity. What drives Dunayevskaya back to "history and its process", the history being the birth and development of Marx's philosophy of liberation 1843-83, is not history as such, but future, an end to the prehistory of human beings and a beginning of their full, free development.

The challenge is to capture Marxism as a concrete totality, as a developing universal which provides us not with a prescription for revolution, but as a way of looking at this society, a way of listening to the voices determined to be free, a way of thinking, a methodology of viewing and participating in our own freedom activities of today.

Out of such a labor, out of such an active appreciation for the total body of Marx's thought and not just as analysis, or philosophy in the abstract, we can create new dimensions in ourselves as revolutionaries. For Dunayevskaya, Marxism as a body of thought and action involves anticipation of the revolution; actual participation in its events; a summing up of a historic revolutionary moment, including self-criticism; and a projection towards a future revolutionary transformation that will once and for all end this class-ridden, sexist, racist society.

It is out of this total view of Marx's philosophy of revolution that we can then grapple with Marx's concept of woman and its necessity for our own working out of where to go now in the women's movement and in the revolutionary movement as a whole.