

# Gender and Marx's Radical Humanism in The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844

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### Headnote

Marx speaks of "human" as a starting point for his discussion of infinite variability, mutability, and differences among human beings. In this article, I unpack Marx's notion of "species-being" in order to establish Marx's idea about the historical nature of human beings. I then go on to show how Marx viewed the male/female relation as an indicator of the development of a nonanimalistic human. I conclude by showing how Marxian humanism is radically socially constructivist yet is allied with an active political "subject." I conclude by showing how Marxian humanism can benefit feminist and queer theories.

Key Words: Marx, Gender, Humanism

It is not uncommon for one or two students a year to ask me why Marx still appears on my syllabus. This certainly reflects the fact that Marx exists for many only insofar as he was connected to the Soviet state. In this view, the failure of the USSR and its allies is simultaneously the failure of Marxism as a theory. Marxism, or a particular version of it, is thus too often conflated with the entire corpus of Marx's work. For many, Marx exists only in that American cold war moment as a totalitarian, antidemocratic, economically deterministic naïf who believed that human beings were altruistic by nature. Such cold war ideology remains remarkably tenacious even among many academics who read Marx this way and reflect it in their teaching about him. Thus, I was relatively unfazed when a very bright undergraduate asked near the end of a lecture I gave about Marx's views on democracy and human nature, "If this is all true, why haven't I heard it before?" Good question.

Indeed, the Marx I will discuss is a democratic humanist and a radical social constructivist who is antideterminist. Far from believing that human beings are altruists, he is convinced of man's selfishness. What I hope to show is that feminists and queer theorists alike can benefit from a dialectical reading of the works of the early Marx. I will argue that Marx's concept of species-being (Gattungswesen) is a good foundation for this radically social constructivist, feminist humanism, and I will draw parallels between Marxist humanist conceptualizations of the body and those of queer theory. I will argue that Marx's concept of "human" is precisely in line with contemporary postessentialist notions of it and, thus, compatible with certain strains in feminism and queer theory.

### The Early Marx

Althusser and others have suggested *The German Ideology* as a point of departure in the Marxian corpus, dividing the works of the "mature" from those of the "young" Marx. It is there, Althusser and his followers have argued, that Marx begins to depart from the humanism of his youth to develop a full-fledged class analysis. Thus, the work of the late Marx was to become the basis of the "science" of Marxism.

Interestingly, it is these works of the later Marx that seem to have garnered the most attention from feminists. The feminist use of Marxism has tended to concentrate mostly on its economic categories. Thus, the 1970s and, to a certain extent, the 1980s, were marked by lengthy debates about the viability of applying Marxian economics

to analyze the condition of women. In these discussions, Marx was almost invariably taken up for what he said about labor, production, and reproduction rather than for what he said about human beings and social construction.<sup>2</sup> Early Second Wave feminists were mostly concerned about the possibilities of synthesizing Marxian economics with feminism. In hindsight, these were precisely the wrong ways for feminists to appropriate Marx. Too often feminists criticized Marx for not talking about "women's work" in the home, and sought to remedy the situation by using Marxian categories by analogy with feminist ones. These readings of Marx ended up being too literal, decrying his emphasis on the workplace and arguing that it ignored the realities of women's day-to-day lives in the home. An exception to these literalist appropriations, feminist standpoint theory attempted to develop a feminist epistemology, but erred in rooting it in Lukácsian versions of Marxism.

Though standpoint theory was first mentioned by Lukács in his early *History and Class Consciousness*, it was Stalin who took it to mean that one needed to "impute class consciousness" to the proletariat, and then to the party. Ultimately, of course, he was the only one who allegedly knew the correct class standpoint. It could successfully be argued that this was the natural implication of Lukács's standpoint theory, as it suggested that social analysts and intellectual elites could take the "standpoint" of the proletariat. If interpreted this way, one is really being asked to engage in abstraction. One is asked to imagine what the class would want if it were, in fact, to exist self-consciously and be able to make its own choices and decisions. The fact that it is not so constituted, of course, has everything to do with whether it is the revolutionary agent, a point this version of standpoint theory misses. As history has shown, this version of standpoint theory meant that elites could justify antidemocratic and totalitarian impulses by falsely portraying themselves as representatives of "working-class" sentiments and interests. Feminist standpoint makes a similar move when it purports to know the experiences of "woman" or "women" and then to theorize from that standpoint (Grant 1994; Hekman 1997, 341-66).

In the midst of all of this Marxology, postmodern theory was widely embraced by many social theorists. In the context of postmodernism, Marxism appeared to be little more than a quaint, if totalitarian, theory whose major contribution to social theory was to give Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard (all of whom had Marxist teachers) to the world. In the feminist tradition Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, and Derrida are given most of the credit for the very notion of social construction even though they themselves got this notion from Marx (Rubin 1997; Butler 1999; Sedgwick 1990). Given this history in feminism and social theory, it is not surprising that the majority of feminist theorists appear to have come to a consensus that Marx's work is inapplicable to feminism (for example, see Hartman's essay in Sargent and MacKinnon 1989). I do not agree. I argue that a reconsideration of the usefulness of Marx for feminism must begin not from his economics, but from his humanism. To do this it is necessary to first summarize his claims about species-being.

While the next few pages may appear far afield of feminist theory, I assure the reader that a connection will be made apparent in due course. In what follows, I will be trying to lay the groundwork for an explanation about the importance of Marx for feminist theory. My argument is that the significance lies not in what he has to say about women, but in what he has to say about the social nature of gender relations. Taken by themselves, Marx's comments about women are not very enlightening. Indeed, this was precisely the observation of early second Wave feminist theorists. However, as a dialectician Marx did not analyze "women" in isolation. He did not look at "woman" as an abstraction, but as part of dynamic vision of an ever changing humanity. Therefore, in order to develop a Marxian analysis of women one must first understand the Marxian view of human.

This can be confusing since the category "human" is not an abstraction for Marx, either. A central component of Marxian ontology is the notion that human beings create and are created by economic and social contexts. Importantly, even in the 1844 Manuscripts the category human is not seen by Marx as a monolithic "human." He makes this point again very clearly in the Theses on Feuerbach where he chides Feuerbach for employing an essentialized category "human" that can be "comprehended only as 'genus', as an internal, dumb generality which naturally unites the many individuals" (Marx 1994, 100).

Importantly, Marx sees human as an unevenly constructed category. This would have to be so the category changes across time and cultures and vis-à-vis one's place in the production process. In this sense it is a mistake to see Marx's humanism as distinct from his later class analysis, as the latter emanates quite easily from the former. Marx always understood that human beings were not of one type and that the stakes in terms of issues of power differed according to one's circumstance. Whenever Marx speaks of the "human" it is merely as a starting point for his discussion of the infinite variability, mutability, and difference among human beings. The political and moral problem for Marx is how to create a situation where those differences can be allowed to flourish

according to the creative desires of human beings rather than being incidental outcomes of social structures. He is sensitive to differences among people but the lesson is always that the differences are social constructs. I will begin by unpacking Marx's notion of "species-being." This will establish his idea of the historical nature of human beings. I will then go on to show how Marx viewed the male/female relation as an indicator of the development of a nonanimalistic human and, finally, how this kind of humanism can benefit feminist and queer theories.

### Species-Being

Marx discusses the notion of species-being in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. In that work, he argues that mankind is distinct from all other animals in that we alone can transcend necessity and produce freely. Mankind, unlike animals, "makes his life activity itself an object of will and consciousness" (Marx 1967, 294). The result is that mankind, unlike other animals, is able to change as a species through its own creative labor. Marx writes, "To be sure animals also produce. They build themselves nests, dwelling places, like the bees, beavers, ants, etc. But the animal produces only what is immediately necessary for itself and its young ... man produces universally. The animal produces under the domination of immediate physical need while man produces free of physical need and only genuinely so in freedom from such need. The animal only produces itself while man reproduces the whole of nature" (294-5). Thus, from the get go, human beings are different because of their role in production.

Marx notes that mankind is only genuinely producing as man when he does so freely. Marx means by this that "man" is not producing from his authentic being as human if his labor is turned into mere animalistic work (i.e., if it is coerced, divided from itself into mental and manual, etc.).<sup>3</sup> Further, Marx writes that man is a universal being. That is, mankind's transformation is also the transformation of everything else. Mankind alone can make "the whole of nature his inorganic body." The whole of nature becomes an extension of the human. It is important to note that Marx viewed this as an empirical and historical statement and not an ethical or moral one. It is offered as an explanation for why human transformation of the species also amounts to a transformation of nature. As such, it is universal (Marx 1967, 293). Marx is often misunderstood to be making some normative Lockean, Smithian, or biblical point about man's just claim to have dominion over the earth. In fact, he is simply describing the truth that mankind's capacity to transform itself by mixing human labor with external nature necessarily implies that nature itself will also be transformed according to mankind's development. As an aside, Marx will argue later that mankind can guide its development in any number of directions. Indeed, this is the entire premise upon which the possibility of the transformation to socialism and communism rests; to wit, it is possible for mankind to transform the selfish human nature that exists under capitalism and create a new nature based in authentic human need. Marx encourages us to believe that this latter is a more genuinely human nature in that it enables humans to engage their full creative, moral, and productive capacities. These are capacities that Marx believes he has already observed in history. That is to say, Marx believes that the goal of species-being derives immanently from history.

Thus, Marx is not necessarily making a claim for the domination of nature by man. Surely, self-directing, democratic-communist humans would be free to decide to treat "nature" (trees, animals, etc.) more respectfully than they are treated in capitalist economies. Of course, they might still decide not to. It is likely that they would, I think, since Marx makes the radical claim that these aspects of nature are extensions of the human body. It might follow then that to mistreat nature is to mistreat self. Further, since the body is enmeshed in the social relations of history (as is nature), the body loses some of its meaning as individual, biological entity. In contrast to the isolated body that is usually conceptualized as an individual biological artifact, Marx sees the human body when human as differing precisely in that it is not bound by its organic, transhistorical, biologically determined form. To be fully human is to be a historical species-being whose very nature lies in mutability.

We arrive at a point in the argument where mankind as species-being has the capacity to control, in both direction and kind, the mutability of nature, society, and the body. This is accomplished through mankind's own self-conscious, sensuous activity. But this capacity to self-consciously direct change is not inevitable. The transformation of nature and consequently of human beings merely has the potential to be actualized as a self-conscious, reflective, creative, and willed activity. While it is true that Marx writes that for man, unlike other animals, "his own life is an object for him," he also writes that self-consciousness about this reality "is not a determination with which he immediately identifies" (Marx 1967, 294). That is, since human beings are not aware of their own species power, species-being does not truly exist as such, but only as potential. Aside from

being Hegelian, Marx is also Aristotelian in this analysis, believing man's telos to derive from potentia. Marx will later make a similar and better-known argument about class consciousness when he writes that the proletariat is a class in itself, but that it is not yet constituted for itself. It exists objectively, but not yet subjectively as a self-conscious class.

It is only under conditions of alienation that humans work as animals do—that is, for mere existence. Work, under conditions of capitalist relations, stands in contrast to the kind of free labor Marx describes as transformative of the human species. Since work under capitalism is "external" to the worker (i.e., not controlled by him), "it is not part of his nature." Furthermore, "the worker does not affirm himself in his work but denies himself, feels miserable and unhappy. The worker develops no free physical and mental energy but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind. The worker therefore feels at ease only outside his work, and during work he is outside himself. He is at home when he is not working and when he is working he is not at home" (292).

So far, there is nothing about gender relations. Marx is establishing the historical nature of human being by showing how it is different from animal. True humanity has something to do with production and creativity. Inasmuch as work becomes more and more like the rote behavior of animals, mankind acts merely from necessity and not from the creative desires of a free, autonomous being. Humans are alienated from their own nature as well as from themselves as individuals. In capitalism, mankind is literally dehumanized. Marx concludes that to get man to engage in this kind of work that is by definition alienating, humans must be coerced. In other places, Marx will argue that the wage contract under capitalism is a sham since it offers the illusion that work is an act freely entered into by the worker, when, in fact, no human would voluntarily give up his humanity if he had the true option of declining the "choice." Due to the alienating nature of work under capitalism, the "spontaneity of the human brain and heart" is crushed. "Man (the worker) feels that he is acting freely only in his animal functions—eating, drinking and procreating ... while in his human functions he feels only like an animal ... To be sure, eating, drinking and procreating are genuine human functions. In abstraction, however, and separated from the remaining sphere of human activities and turned into final and sole ends, they are animal functions" (292). This will become important to the discussion of gender relations insofar as the gender hierarchy is another example of this kind of domination of human potential.

Mankind and nature exist in a dialectical relationship. Marx argues that it makes sense to conceptualize nature from the point of view of mankind as species-being because it is the nature of humans to change themselves and, in so doing, to change the rest of nature. For instance, from the standpoint of species-being, the mere passage of "time" (misunderstood as a purely natural phenomenon) becomes "history" (which is "time" when conceptualized as socially constructed by man).

Likewise, senses as they exist in animals are not the same as those that exist in man. Needs themselves are transformed. Even the need for food is transformed. Marx writes that the starving man thinks of food abstractly and does not imagine it in a human way (309-10). Therefore, mankind's nature, in the fullest sense of the term, is historically contingent, as is, conversely, nature itself. As such, when it is transformed by mankind, it is nonetheless, still "nature." Ultimately it, too, is subject to the laws of history because history itself is natural. This is what Marx means when he writes: "The whole of history is a preparation for 'man' to become the object of sensuous awareness and for the needs of 'man as man' to become sensuous needs. History itself is an actual part of natural history, of nature's development into man. Natural science will in time include the science of man as the science of man will include natural science: There will be one science" (312). It follows, then, that industrial societies are "natural" and static, organic nature is a myth. Marx was far ahead of Donna Haraway in proclaiming mankind's cyborgian nature, a point she no doubt recognizes in identifying herself as a socialist feminist (Haraway 1991, 149-81).

### Species Man, Species Woman

Finally, we can begin to discuss what all this means for gender relations and for Marx's view of women. If the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts have been mentioned by feminists at all, it is usually to quote several specific passages that deal directly with women. However, because these have been taken out of the context of Marx's corpus, and because they concentrate on women rather than gender relations, I believe they have given an incorrect impression as to Marx's importance for feminist and queer theories. Having gone through in some detail Marx's arguments about what it means to be human, we can now turn our attention to his understanding of the differences among human beings with regard to gender. Marx does in fact argue that women exist at a different

stage of development than man. This is akin to his argument that nature changes as mankind does. Marx is making a historical point, not an ethical one. He is not arguing that men ought to be at a different stage of development than women. To the contrary, he is describing how this situation of unfreedom for women is evidence of the low level of development of humanity as species. This is so, Marx argues, because the male-over-female hierarchy is alleged to be natural when in fact it is social. Thus Marx argues that the relatively low position of women is part of the evidence of the failure of human beings to comprehend their natures as species-beings. This needs further explanation.

I will turn for a moment to Marx's discussion of women that occurs in the context of his critique of the "Utopian socialists" Proudhon, Saint-Simon, and Fourier. This is a famous passage, but viewing it from the point of view of species-being and gender relations rather than simply "women" allows us to see it in a new light. The basic argument is that the communism that Utopian socialists advance does not elevate the working man, but only extends poverty to all (Marx 1997, 302). Marx goes on to say that Utopian communists err in wanting to level everyone regardless of their talents or personalities. Marx's point is similar to one of Aristotle's critiques of democracy: that it treats unlike people as though they were alike. What is worse, Utopian socialists seek the very destruction of culture and civilization. Marx eschews this kind of leveling. In this he foreshadows the famous dictum from his much later work that communism will exist according to only one law: "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs" (Marx 1978, 531).

Marx goes on to argue that even property is misunderstood by the Utopian socialists, and here is where he makes one of his most famous comments about women. Utopian socialists incorrectly think that communal ownership is, in and of itself, a significant social transformation and an authentic communist vision. In fact, Marx counters, communal ownership is not true appropriation, but is merely the universalisation of the ideal of private property. It falsely posits the view that freedom is achieved simply when everyone becomes an owner. Marx argues that the Utopian socialists have not transcended the concept of property, but have simply held out a reformist ideal as though it were revolutionary. Failing to take account of history, the Utopian socialists ask "the poor and wantless man" to go beyond private property when he has not yet even achieved it.

It is in this surprising context that Marx takes the opportunity to comment on the situation of women in marriage.

The relationship of private property remains the relationship of the community to the world of things. Ultimately this movement which contrasts universal private property to private property is expressed in the animalistic form that marriage (surely a form of exclusive private property) is counterposed to the community of women where they become communal and common property. We might say that this idea of the community of women is the open secret of this still very crude, unthinking communism. (1967, 302)

Referring back to his arguments about species-being, Marx thus argues that marriage, under conditions of bourgeois social relations, exists in a merely "animalistic" form. What does this mean? As will be recalled from the above discussion of species-being, Marx understands the animal as that which is not in control of its own destiny. Thus, his complaint here can be read to mean that bourgeois marriage lacks autonomy and freedom and therefore is merely an expression of private property. His complaint, then, is that the Utopian socialists seek to extend this "property right" universally in creating a community of women. The complaint is that women are treated as property in bourgeois marriage and would also have that status in a communal marriage. Marx is accusing the Utopian socialists of failing to rescue women from their status as property. Marx goes on to argue that their belief in so-called free love is no more than universal prostitution, and likens it to adultery among the bourgeoisie. All maintain women as property. He goes on to argue that this commonality speaks to the primitive quality of the Utopian communist vision. He writes, "As women go from marriage into universal prostitution, so the whole world of wealth-that is, the objective essence of man-passes from the relationship of exclusive marriage with the private owner into the relationship of universal prostitution with the community" (302).

All are versions of the same animalistic/nonhuman relation. This is not really communism, but only "universal envy establishing itself as a power" in a "disguised form in which greed reestablishes and satisfies itself in another way" (302). In Utopian socialist thought, women are, Marx writes, merely "the spoil and handmaid of communal lust" (303). The ownership of women maintains both the property relation and human beings' animal nature. The relations between men and women are thus indicative of the low level of human development, and Marx is pointing out that the plan of the Utopian socialists has merely reproduced this social relationship as though it were natural.

Marx consistently sees bourgeois marriage as one of the foundations of private property and ownership. He wrote in the *German Ideology* that the family and marriage were the practical basis on which bourgeois domination rested. In that work, Marx reiterates his point that the family is constituted in terms of property relations, even going so far as to say that the "wife and children are the slaves of the husband" (1999, 52). Throughout the Marxian corpus we find references to the hypocrisy of bourgeois sentimentalization of marriage. In reality, Marx is quick to point out, bourgeois husbands frequent brothels and have sex with each other's wives. In that sense, bourgeois marriage does little more than turn women into prostitutes as it turns them into items of exchange and commerce (Marx 1996, 17).

Marx understands the social nature of male/female relations and sees its naturalization as indicative of the failure of human beings to understand their true creative potential. Marcuse argues that Marx repeated this criticism of the bourgeois family so often because he thought it illustrated the historically specific nature of the family (Marcuse 1972, 142). Marx's analysis of marriage is an analysis of the ways in which bourgeois notions of property have transformed the institution and gender relations themselves. The effect has been not to liberate women but to place them under new conditions of domination. Importantly, Marx is not being critical of marriage per se as a human relationship. In support of this one might look to another early, journalistic work critical of a proposed divorce law. There, Marx likens marriage to friendship and the just state. In so doing he hints at what he might consider a "human marriage" to be. He writes that marriage is an ethical relationship. "A true state, a true marriage, a true friendship is indissoluble" (Marx 1997, 140). It ought to be a relation of equals, but its constant mediation via other social and economic institutions prevents this. Marriages will, thus, be dissolved. However, as ethical, human relations, it is the participants and not the state that have the sole power to dissolve them. "Divorce is nothing but the declaration that a marriage is dead and that its existence is only pretense and deception . . . the legislator can only determine when it may be dissolved, though essentially it already is dissolved. The judicial dissolution can be only the recording of the inner dissolution" (141). Thus, authentic human marriage should be more like friendship than a property relation. It ought to be a relation based on freedom rather than necessity. When based on necessity (e.g., lust, procreation, or economic necessity), the relation is not human and takes on the character of an alienated property relation. But when the union is based on ethics, friendship, and choice, it is transformed into an authentic human relationship. Both capitalism and Utopian socialism misconstrue marriage as a relation of property and lust.

The discussion of marriage is not only about women. It is about men and humanity. The institution of marriage reflects and reproduces the property relation. In the process, it captures gender relations at a certain moment in their development and fixes them hierarchically as male over female, though in capitalism this is figured in terms of the property idiom. The relation between men and women in marriage is one of property owner and property not because of what woman is intrinsically, but because of what woman becomes within the capitalist relations of production. Whatever gender hierarchy had existed (and Marx clearly believes that another predated capitalism), it is transformed under capitalism. It is clear that Marx believes that, like workers, women are not fully human because to be fully human requires that one be free.

In another of Marx's most famous passages about women, he writes, "In the relationship with woman, as the spoil and handmaid of communal lust, is expressed the infinite degradation in which man exists for himself since the secret of this relationship is its unambiguous, decisive, plain, and revealed expression in the relationship of man to woman and in the way in which the immediate, natural species relationship is conceived" (1997, 303). That is, women are conceptualized as property and objects of lust, and then that conceptualization is portrayed as natural. In fact, this is merely a social condition and is evidence of the "degradation in which man exists." Gender relations show the low level of humanity, both male and female as the species-being of both men and women are degraded by the relationship. A relation that could be one of friendship and equality is one of domination in which the creative spirits of men are ordered by their physical desires and the creative desires of women are simply ignored altogether. A male/female difference exists, but it is one which is itself evidence of the low state of humanity.

Thus inspired, Marx moves on to elaborate quite emphatically on how gender relations are a kind of barometer for man's development as species-being.

From this relationship one can thus judge the entire level of mankind's development. From the character of this relationship follows the extent to which man has become and comprehended himself as a generic being, as man; the relationship of man to woman is the most natural relationship of human being to human being. It thus

indicates the extent to which man's natural behavior has become human or the extent to which his human essence has become a natural essence for him, the extent to which his human nature has become nature to him. In this relationship is also apparent the extent to which man's need has become human, thus the extent to which the other human being, as human being has become a need for him, the extent to which he in his most individual existence is at the same time a social being. (Marx 1997, 303)

It is the male/female relationship that is, for Marx, the gauge of mankind's progress as species. But it is not merely the male's development that is measured here, but, finally, mankind's. This is why Marx uses the terms *mensch* and *menschliche Gesellschaft* in the German text, using words that refer to both men and women.<sup>4</sup> It is clear that Marx regards women as human beings since he describes the evolution of male/female relations as one of "human being to human being." It is from this relationship that we can judge the entire development of "mankind." Still, as we have seen above, the relation can exist in its animal form-as one of mere necessity based on lust and economic and procreative need.

Recall that elsewhere, in the context of discussing how the alienating character of work in capitalism dehumanizes man, causing him to mistakenly view his basest desires, motivations, and activities as human, Marx wrote that man only felt human when he performed base animal functions like eating, drinking, and procreating. He was quick to add that these were human functions only under certain historical conditions (1997, 292). Thus, lust and procreation, human functions, become animalized only when they are viewed as ends in themselves. Significantly, it is when these activities are animalized that women will be treated merely as the "handmaidens of lust."

The important point here is that to the extent that man treats woman as an object of his animal desire, neither he nor the woman can be authentically human species-beings. It is in this way that Marx regards the male/female relationship as indicative of the extent "to which his human essence has become a natural essence for him, the extent to which his human nature has become nature to him" (303). Man's ability to treat woman as a human being, reflects the extent to which his own humanity has become manifest. Men move away from their animal natures and create a human nature which then becomes nature to them. As men and women move toward this ideal, the gender relation becomes one of human being to human being because both man and woman are transformed into species-beings. Looking at what the 1844 Manuscripts say about women rather than gender obscures this key point.

The denaturalization of gender relations is one of the ways in which time changes to history, humans knows themselves as species-beings and become constructed as a moral subject. Before this occurs, neither woman nor man is truly human. That Marx views man as the dominant party in the transformation from animal to human merely reflects the reality that males were structurally dominant over females. Marx's point is that to the extent that males treated women as objects to acquire, both men and women were kept in a nonhuman state of being. The progress of women in achieving humanity is the benchmark for the progress of the entire species because her subjugation by men wrongly marks her as animal. However, the fact that men want to dominate women in such a way marks them as animal as well. Human self-conscious realization of the faulty and unjust nature of this relation simultaneously allows both men and women to know themselves as human, and creates the possibility for the release of all humans from bonds of nature and necessity into the realm of human nature and freedom.

### An Antiessentialist Humanist Vision

Much ink has been given to the problem of essentialism in feminist theory, and there is a fear in feminist theory that linking feminism to humanism would recreate the problem of essentialism. Likewise, there is a fear that humanism relies on an a priori notion of the human that ignores difference (Butler 1993; Fuss 1990; Spelman 1998). It is therefore important to show that Marxist humanism is not essentialist and that it takes difference into account.

I will begin by considering two paradoxes within the 1844 Manuscripts with regard to the concept of species-being. First, Marx simultaneously does and does not believe that species-being exists under capitalism. While on the one hand Marx clearly wants to argue that man is already a species-being, he also wants to argue that the nineteenth-century capitalist manifestation of species-being does not represent humans in their fullest, most authentic, or most genuine capacity. In this way, species-being exists but is historicized. Under capitalism it exists only as potential and is differentially realized in various human beings according to their positions in a

variety of institutional structures. In this paper, I have given Marx's example of the institution of marriage as an example of this. The evolution of human beings into species-beings can be measured in many ways, Marx argues, and he specifically analyzes gender relations as a major indicator.

A second paradox exists in that Marx claims that humans do and do not have a human nature. His view on this is radically different from all other theories of human nature in Western philosophy up to that point. The rest tend to ascribe certain essential and static characteristics to human beings (e.g., "rationality," or the seeking of pleasure and the avoidance of pain). This list of essential characteristics is what makes other humanist theories essentialist and what separates Marxian humanism from them. In contrast, Marx's position is that the one constant about human nature is that it is fundamentally self-transformational. In other words, its one defining feature is its nonessentialist nature. The single defining feature of human beings is that they are constantly transforming themselves and all of nature. Mankind is simultaneously natural and historical. It is unfree when it does not know itself as free.

Marx differs from Hegel in this insofar as he envisions this evolution to freedom only as one possible outcome of history. Mankind may remain unreflective and therefore never achieve its full potential as species-being. Marx believed it irrational (and thus impossible) to remain in a condition of unfreedom when one understands the possibility of an alternative and can concretely choose otherwise. Thus, Marx believed species-being to be, on the one hand, merely one possible outcome for mankind (and not a result of the inevitable march of history, as Hegel believed). Freedom seemed to him, however, to be a very likely outcome of the evolution of human reason. What is imperative for any change to occur is that human beings understand and accept their role in historical change. That this is accomplished through rational reflexivity does not constitute a claim on Marx's part that rationality is an essentially defining feature of mankind since he remains adamant that the defining feature of mankind is its ability to transform and transcend its circumstances.

Marx reminds us that historical analysis must necessarily include the wild card that is human subjectivity. Human nature dictates, then, that history cannot be foretold, since human subjects are not merely imprinted by history but also create and imprint it. Marx writes in the Theses on Feuerbach, "The materialist doctrine concerning the change of circumstances and education forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated" (1994, 99). Interpretation alone, he says famously in the Eleventh Thesis, misses the point, which is change (101). For Marx, human subjectivity entails the ability to speculate on one's circumstances, and then to act upon that speculation.

Feminist theory (along with the rest of social theory) has been heavily influenced by poststructuralist thought. Therefore, one of the reasons Marx is now rejected by many feminists is because he is wrongly thought to have believed in a static reality and possessed an empiricist concept of the objective. While it is true that Marx uses the term "objective," it is a methodological error to mistake this for an empiricist-style notion of reality on two counts. First, the Marxian concept is multiple and shifting, not a totalizing monolith. This is why Marx can claim that there are multiple moments of immanence within the objective. Second, the objective is nothing but "mere abstraction" without the subjective side; it is nothing without the interpretive, the actor. Marx argues quite clearly against both essentializing the category "human" and maintaining a static, monolithic conceptualization of reality. To attribute a fixed set of traits to the category "human" essentializes the category, and fixes it by describing it according to a reality established only under a given set of historical circumstances. The circumstances of history are, of course, finished the moment they have arrived and conceptualization of human being made in one moment will very likely be inaccurate in the next. Marx cannot be an essentialist since that does not take into account the dynamism of history and human being that is integral to dialectical thinking.

Another charge often leveled against humanism is that it ignores difference. Yet in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, it is clear that Marx was already aware of the differential impact of historical circumstances on human beings. His analysis of gender shows that men, for instance, are "not yet human" in a different way than women are "not yet human." But Marx spent the bulk of his life examining the ways in which the proletariat is "not yet human" in a way that differs from the "not yet human" quality of the bourgeoisie. In short, he does not care about the hardships capitalism inflicts or does not inflict on the bourgeoisie. Yet, neither does he eschew insulting the working class for the "idiocy" (Marx's word) into which it sinks due to the alienating character of capitalism. Marx does not romanticize the proletariat. Neither does he mean to ignore the problem of gender difference when he calls the proletariat the universal class. Rather, his contention is simply

that, because of a variety of historical accidents, the proletariat is the universal class and the agent of revolutionary change.

That Marx did not romanticize the working class has not stopped socialists from doing so. For feminists, this has meant that Marx's use of words like "productive" has been obscured by the erroneous belief that they are honorific terms. In early Marxist and socialist feminism, a great deal of time was wasted attempting to argue that women's work in the home was "productive," socialist feminists having falsely believed Marx's use of the term "unproductive" labor to be pejorative. Marx is not saying that "unproductive" work is not work, but merely that it is not work that produces value in a capitalist sense. And producing value in capitalism is not necessarily a good thing.

This train of thought led Marxist feminists to investigate the class position of women, sometimes in excruciating detail. Since one's class position derived from one's place in the production process, it seemed that women who worked in the home were neither owners nor wage earners. In short, they derived their class positions from the men with whom they were involved. Marxist and socialist feminists worried that women had no independent class status in Marxism. This analysis rested upon the assumption that the Marxian categories of "production" and "reproduction" constituted a dualism not dissimilar to "public" and "private" in liberalism.

In fact, production and reproduction are dialectically intertwined and are not a dualism in the way that "public/private" is. The relationality of the two is, for Marx, one of the defining features of capitalism. Reproduction, for instance, includes a variety of activities that do not take place in the home, such as education and the circulation of capital. Teaching is, for instance, unproductive labor, but this does not mean that Marx thought it was unimportant or that teachers had no class position. Likewise, one does not stop being a worker upon leaving the factory and entering the home. Male workers are still workers when they take out the garbage at home even though in doing so, they are engaging in reproductive work. Holding aside the equally significant fact that not all women work solely in the home and might well be "productive workers" in the Marxian sense, it is also true that no one exists simply in one sphere or the other. A second point is that while it is technically true that individual workers get their class status from their position vis-à-vis the means of production, and this is still probably disproportionately men, "class" cannot be thought of in liberal terms as merely the collective name for a group of individuals defined according to a static, economic set of criteria. Class refers also to a set of interests, and in the incentive to transform society in a certain direction. Ultimately, this is objectively measured according to one's position in the production process. Yes, class also has to do with the set of circumstances that form consciousness as a class. This can occur outside the factory and is akin to what Habermas thought of as the "life world." By this definition, "working-class" women, even when they only work in the home, are as much members of the working class as the men on assembly lines are. Later thinkers were able to discuss class and gender in more integrative ways (Fraad, Resnick, and Wolff 1994).

Dwelling on Marxian economics and the class status of women has meant devoting much time to discussing the places where surplus value is or is not extracted. Thus, it was argued by some feminists that the work women do in reproduction is part of the surplus value extracted from workers. This line of argument was only significant in that it sought to allow women's work to be defined as "productive" in Marx's sense of the term. Marx's theories about the exploitation of labor through the extraction of surplus value were contributions to discussions about profit and wages, which is by no means all there is to Marxism. Marx is very clear in claiming that communism is much more than simply the communal ownership of property or the collective extraction of surplus value (a fundamental error in Soviet-style communism). It is important to historicize Marxian economicism as the product of an interpretation of Marxism in a single historical epoch. Having left that epoch, we can now return to his larger point about the nature of human beings and the meaning of a truly free society. At this point in time, the most important thing about Marxism may be his analysis of history and human being.

All this is not to trivialize the significance of "class" as a category in Marxism. It is to serve as a reminder that the entire point of class revolution was to achieve a humanist vision wherein human beings were equal moral agents. It is a vision that Marx believed could be made real only if it were both idealist and materialist. Hence, labor, as a mediator between mental and manual, subject and object, thought and action, and so on, becomes the central component in Marx's theory of revolution. However, if we are willing to gain whatever insight we can from Marx's radical humanism, we might begin to think about the possibility that the problem of agency, the revolutionary agent, and the nature of structural mediations that divide humans change across time. Gender now

emerges as a major mediation, and one that artificially restricts human potential by masking itself as natural and immutable.

## Feminist Humanism

It remains to understand how a feminist humanism that makes use of Marx can be compatible with contemporary social constructionist, postidentity theories. So far I have been arguing that Marx's humanism is profoundly social constructivist even maintaining that the breakdown of naturalistic gender constraints is necessary to historical progress, human subjectivity, and authentic human agency. The transformation into human subjects is evolutionary and fundamentally connected to gender. Up until now I have only discussed human transformation as a matter of consciousness. But from a feminist and queer theory point of view, a really exciting aspect of Marxian humanism is that it includes the body. Indeed, the body itself is also self-consciously transformed by humans and can be self-consciously changed in a variety of directions by the fully realized species-being. Marx has argued this separately in claiming that nature is part of man's body, and that the two change together. The body is released from the bonds of nature into its new nature. Marx's is a human nature in which the rest of nature is itself conceptualized as an extension of the body to be transformed and transforming through acts of free, self-conscious human creation.

The most exciting work toward this kind of humanist vision of gender self-determination is being done in "queer theory." I am aware that there is some emerging debate about the relationship of queer to feminist theory. My own view is that the two are similar to the extent that they both adhere to a vision of full self-determination, equality, and freedom for all people regardless of what body they may inhabit. Further, they are compatible inasmuch as they see the self-determination of one's sexuality as central to human freedom. This is compatible with the Marxian version of species-being I have elaborated above in that it sees gender relations and the body as mutable; does not view technological transformation of the body as "unnatural"; sees consciousness, the gender structure, and the body as socially constructed; acknowledges that their transformations can be accomplished through the creative self-direction of human beings; and sees that creative self-direction as a step toward a more genuinely free humanity.

On the feminist side, this definition probably leaves out cultural feminists who want to maintain some notion of femininity, mothering theorists who see mothering rather than sexuality as key to women's liberation, and the sex-police feminists who argue that certain modes of sexual expression are by definition antiwoman. I admit, then, at the outset that it is only a particular kind of feminism that is compatible with the kind of humanist feminism I am advocating. It is a feminism that believes that it is the gender structure that is at the root of female subordination. Thus, for me, arguments starting from gender do not contradict a certain version of feminist goals.

Kate Bornstein is one of the new crop of theorists who puts sexual liberation in humanist terms, and who points to the historical nature of the physical body. To point up the importance of the idea of the mutability of the body for any concrete vision of human freedom, she introduces the provocative notion of "biological gender." Bornstein defines this as a system that "classifies a person through any combination of body type, chromosomes, hormones, genitals, reproductive organs, or some other corporeal or chemical essence" (1994, 30). That is, biological gender is a structure of power that classifies a wide variety of human beings into only two types based upon an ad hoc list of naturalized biological traits. She goes on to say that this constitutes a privileging of the body in identity formation. I would amend this to read that gender privileges a particular kind of body: one that is unchanged by history, and that is then made to seem natural. Bornstein's suggestion is that in order to avoid naturalizing this kind of body, we should conceptualize the body as another form of gender. Thus, we would no longer speak of the sex/gender system, but only of gender to designate both. This move would signify that the body, too, is historicized. Sex, she argues, should refer only to sexual activities.

Bornstein acknowledges that human freedom is her goal. In addition, she points to the historical mutability of the body, the roots of that mutability in desire, and the role of technology and human innovation in directing the conditions of one's existence. All this is perfectly consistent with what I described above as Marx's view of species-being except that queer theory approaches its conceptualization solely from the point of view of gender and is not principally concerned with issues of class (or race). Still, it is no wonder Bornstein writes that she is "fast becoming a Marxist" (144).

The invisibility of gender as a system of power is reflected in the construction of transgender as "unnatural." This can subsequently result in its being ignored, medicalized, or criminalized. Several thinkers have observed the persistence of the transgendered person across time and cultures. The desire to cross genders is most often ignored and made invisible. Dworkin, for instance, persuasively links the cross-dressing of Joan of Arc to her vilification and execution. Yet, while most have heard of Joan of Arc and know her as a martyred female warrior, relatively few know that she was also a cross-dresser (Dworkin 1987). If it is not made invisible, transgender can be reconfigured as socially acceptable only if no sexual meaning is ascribed to the behavior. Thus, Bornstein points to the amusing case of the Mumpers Parade that takes place in Philadelphia each year in which "hundreds of men, mostly blue-collar family men, dress up in sequins, feathers, and gowns, and parade up and down the main street of the City of Brotherly Love" (1994, 48). In the worst-case scenarios, however, transgendered behavior is medicalized or criminalized. Thus, Foucault (1980) wrote of the hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin, whose forced sex reassignment led to suicide. In a more contemporary vein, Daphne Scholinski has written a horror story of her institutionalization at the age of fifteen for "Gender Identity Disorder"-this in the 1980s (Scholinsky and Adams 1997).

Bernice Hausman argues that, while transgendered behavior appears to be evident across time and cultures, transsexuality as medical procedure is a phenomenon peculiar to a historical circumstance where a technology exists to effect this kind of radical, physical change. The medicalization of gender as an endocrinological disorder and its rectification through surgery and hormonal treatments appear at first to be an acceptance of transgendered desire. In fact, medicalization presents further opportunities for medical professionals to claim what is normal and what isn't and then to justify sex reassignment only in terms of rectifying a mistake of nature and returning the patient to a normal state of being. That there are still two genders involved in this discussion, and further, that those two genders are conceptualized in terms that are fundamentally patriarchal and heterosexist, is often ignored. Hausman writes that the concept of a disorder of gender identity "is a cover-up for the potentially more threatening idea that transsexuals are subjects who choose to engineer themselves" (1995, 9).

Hausman warns of the dual nature of the linking of desire to technology. Marx might have put the matter thus: While it can be harnessed to effect change, it necessarily must do so in the context of the historical circumstances in which it exists. Therefore, technologies may alter gender, but they will tend to do so in the context of patriarchy. This does not mean that they are not also subverting the patriarchal order. What it does mean is that such subversion is limited by historical circumstance. Allucquere Rosanne Stone (1996) has pointed to similar issues with regard to the link between desire and technology, including her analysis of a man who masqueraded on the Internet as female and disabled. She shows the ways in which he was able to construct an entire identity for himself that then, she argues persuasively, took on a life of its own.

These stories point up the fact that gender is an ideological structure that orders humanity. They illustrate the ways in which gender mediates human-ness. Further, they speak to the fragility of gender's bipolar and hierarchical structure, and explain why it is so vehemently enforced. When its boundaries are violated, the gender structure is exposed as myth. I have written elsewhere of gender as "myth" and of such transgressive behavior as "gender crime." Bornstein independently refers to those who reject gender as "gender outlaws." She uses the film *The Crying Game* to illustrate her point about gender outlaws. Bornstein directs our attention to the scene where a penis is discovered by a man on his ersatz heterosexual and female lover during a sex act. He responds by vomiting. Bornstein writes, "That is what gender outlaws do. Our mere presence is often enough to make people sick."

Queer theorists appear to have a humanist vision that is consistent with what Marx writes about species-being. What Marx writes about species-being is richer and more fully developed. On the other hand, what queer theorists and feminists have written develops Marx's random comments about gender more fully. Both cases illustrate that "human" can be a nonessentialist category that may be useful for postidentity gender theorists. The International Bill of Gender Rights puts the matter of gender freedom in humanist terms. It espouses "universal rights which can be claimed and exercised by every human being" (Feinberg 1997, 165). All this talk of "rights" and "human beings" may seem excessively liberal for a Marxist-based humanism. But Marx was always an advocate of finishing the bourgeois revolution. A major contention throughout his work was not that the bourgeois revolutions were wrong, but that they had not succeeded in their promise of universal freedom.

Leslie Feinberg puts the matter well when she dismisses any possible conflict between her transgender political commitment and her attendance at an abortion defense action. "The heart of both is the right of each individual to

make decisions about our own bodies, and to define ourselves ... That is a right of each woman, each intersexed person, each transsexual man or woman-each human being" (Feinberg 1997, 105).

### Footnote

1. The interpretation I offer here extends from a very rich tradition of democratic, antideterminist Marxist theory (Adorno and Horkheimer 1990; Bottomore and Goode 1978; Bronner 1990; Gramsci 1991; Howard 2002; Jameson 1990; Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Lukács 1972; Luxemburg 1973; Marcuse 1964; Nimtz 2000; Ollman 1976).

2. For examples of these early uses of Marx in feminist theory, see Dalla Costa (1975), Delphy (1984), Hennessy (1993), Eisenstein (1979), Gardiner (1975), Glazer-Malbin (1976), Jaggar and McBride (1985), Kuhn and Wolpe (1978), Mitchell (1971), Molyneux (1979), Nicholson (1986), and Sargent (1981).

3. Throughout this paper I will use the term "man" when attempting to preserve Marx's language. Otherwise, to denote all humans, I will use "mankind," "humankind," or "human being."

4. Thanks to Professor Manfred Steger for this translation.

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