

Marx and Engels: Feminism/Gender/Masculinities

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NB This is a write-up from my notes for the talk. The bulk of the material on which the talk was based comes from the (separate) chapters (9 and 10) on Marx and Engels in my book [Men in Political Theory](#) (Manchester University Press, 2004). As it's hardback only at present, and very expensive, do order it for a library if you can, as it would be nice to have some paperback circulation eventually. The citations, references and reading are all there, rather than here, for which inconvenience please accept my apologies. What follows at the time of writing (20/01/05) is, of course, somewhat updated and altered from what was delivered more than two months ago!

Texts and Contexts

With any set of texts (and with Marx and Engels we have a great many), what we get out of them depends a great deal on what questions we put to them. It also depends on which texts and passages we turn to and which we think are important, and why. The texts of these two authors did not emerge (in print, or otherwise) in anything like the way that they became available (subsequently) to interpreters (and indeed they are still emerging – see the [MEGA2](#) project and the now completed Lawrence & Wishart 50-volume [Collected Works](#), i.e. a selection in English translation). At different points in the historical reception of Marx and Engels (and not always together) different texts have been awarded higher orders of theoretical (or political) priority. It is simply not the case that either or both said what they said at the time of writing, and then that that message has stayed the same.

Moreover we like our texts to have authors; it's extremely difficult even to attempt to say what a text means (about anything) if we have no idea of the author, and the context ascribed to that person (generally by commentators). This raises the issue of 'who' the author is, 'what sort of person' and all the other 'private/public' issues that one can imagine. Moreover it should raise the issue of biographical traditions (but rarely does so) precisely because these are usually established by family members, directly or indirectly (e.g. through the destruction or release of documents), or by colleagues or other associates (such as Engels, in the case of Marx). In terms of what I say below, I ask you to bear these things in mind, because I certainly have.

Overall Argument

Little that is sensible can be said about gender without substantial reference to, and engagement with, what feminists have said on the subject. That said, gender is neither a synonym for women/woman, nor for 'sex' (e.g. M/F) ... as it has rather lazily become, nor are masculinities and femininities a mirror of each other or 'equal' or 'equivalent' in some way, owing to the substantial power-differential held by men (and those who are coded masculine or otherwise

masculine-identified). In my view gender should be used to evoke power issues as these are mapped onto bodies, and indeed these 'sexed' bodies are in this way further imbued with the 'heterosexual matrix', as Judith Butler has argued. Thus sex, gender and sexuality, while inter-related, are also distinguishable analytical categories, and indeed any sensible analysis must include reference to all three (in their distinctness).

Masculinities work differently from femininities in two ways (directly related to men's power differential): (a) 'man' is the (supposedly) abstract or generic 'human subject' (what, drawing on Carole Pateman, I call an 'apparently de-gendered but in fact covertly gendered' representation), and (b) men also present themselves in highly selective (and politically sanitized ways) in what I call 'overtly gendered' roles, as 'good' fathers/son/brothers/husbands etc. These two discourses are (usually unselfconsciously) deployed throughout political texts to men's advantage, and most texts 'flicker' between the two to help accomplish this (obviously other phenomena to do with behaviour rather than 'mere' discourse have a great deal to do with this power-differential as well). Marx and Engels (whom I take to be separate individuals, though lifelong friends and sometime collaborators) are no exception.

The broad outline of my argument about Marx and Engels (taken separately) is that on the whole Marx is just slightly better in terms of what he says (or implies, or doesn't say) about sex, gender and sexuality than he is generally given credit for (though nothing will make him into even a proto-feminist); and Engels is substantially worse on these points, despite the praise as a proto-feminist that he has lately enjoyed. These are arguments of qualification, not stark claims. Many feminists have drawn considerable inspiration from Engels and so they should; Marx has not been very carefully examined on some quite interesting issues to do with sex, gender and sexuality, and I think there might be something (however small) gained by doing this.

Overall Marx is a bit better on these 'gender' issues than his critics have suggested, because he is rather suspicious of naturalizing narratives (though not wholly innocent of them, as I mention below). While this might make his work a bit feminist-friendly (albeit mostly to post-structuralist feminists), he does not centre 'woman' or women politically, when in terms of contemporary politics this was actually possible in various ways. Neither his well documented and independently attested close marriage and family life, nor the supposed 'facts' about his 'illegitimate son'/'affair with the housemaid' (documentation about which is far more questionable than scholarly commentary has let on), seem to have contributed a 'gender perspective' to his work at the time to any noticeable extent. Thus we are left with (deliberate?) silence and (rather masculine) hesitations in the whole area. Given Marx's extraordinarily relentless and virtually lifelong concern with a conceptual critique of the 'economic categories', it is perhaps slightly odd, or at least regrettable, that he did not devote more thought to the 'sexual categories' in and through which humans live a considerable part (at the very least) of their social life.

Engels is a bit worse than his current reputation because he is much more prone to naturalizing narratives, as can be found at length in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). While in that work he appears to centre 'woman', I suggest that this is a bit of an illusion and a rather deceptive displacement: in his text the action in historical change is driven by men, though they – as opposed to women – are not made to appear as 'gendered'. Besides

stereotypical and anachronistic speculations about gender roles, his discussion of pre-history is also driven by a simplistic importation into Marxian theory of Darwinian reproductive imperatives and sexual selection, thus naturalizing men, women and gendered power-differentials in social reproduction. In discussing later history, power-differentials between men and women are displaced by Engels onto bourgeois exploitation, and proletarian domestic/sexual relationships are blatantly romanticized. His own (successive) domestic/sexual relationships with the Burns sisters (Mary and Lizzy) are rather more ambiguous than many commentators have allowed: were these 'affairs' daring cross-class liaisons that flouted the 'bourgeois' conventions of social class? or were they a stereotypically exploitative male mill-owner and female proletarian in a discreet 'suburban household'? Both views were current at the time.

Marx

Leaving aside the (irresolvable) difficulties connected with authorship and content associated with the (manuscript) *German Ideology*, I'll take it for these purposes that Marx can be associated with the texts and thoughts as we have them. There is thus an association between Marx and a fairly extended naturalizing narrative about pre-history and the (presumed) 'basics' of species life in biological terms. In this text Marx (again, leaving Engels aside for the moment) mentions women, but in a naturalizing and depoliticizing (and stereotypical) way when reproduction of the species arises as a topic of interest (or at least one that has to be noted ... and then dropped). The first division of labour is said to be, or to be in, the 'sexual act' ... but what exactly does this mean? How does one project outwards from this 'act' to other social relationships? He does not seem to mention men as (gendered) men until rather extraordinarily he talks of a 'slavery inherent in the family', as opposed to the 'new relations between the sexes' in communist society to come. This intriguing suggestion is never really developed, except perhaps when working-class men are said (in *Capital*, vol. 1) to be forced to sell their wives and children in order to generate a family wage. There are some statements in Marx of natural differences between the sexes, but no study of what this might be (and how any exceptions could be accounted for). Women are thus assigned to a rather underspecified realm of naturalization, and men to a rather more open realm of possibility, subject of course to the direct circumstances of social class (one way or the other, exploiter or exploited). Some of Marx's comments in *Capital*, vol. 1, for instance, seem to betray a Victorian and patronizing view of women as physically weak, in the same category as children, and having a sexuality that needs special care and constraint, especially in the workplace. However, read against the knowledge that most feminisms of his day were actually of the 'difference' variety, and indeed emphasized female moral purity (as opposed to male drunkenness and violence) and campaigned against the need for women to work outside the home (to the presumed neglect of children), Marx's comments look rather better than they do when read against predominating liberal feminisms of today. Of course, he didn't associate himself with any feminisms, but perhaps it can be said that he was at least attentive to the possibilities of sexual exploitation and gendered violence, and not particularly prone to romanticize proletarians in that area.

Careful and contextual reading of Marx on women reveals that he did not wholly ignore what are now seen to be feminist issues, albeit he sought no overt engagement with feminists at the time. His association with naturalizing (and biologizing) narratives is minimal and ambiguous, albeit in interesting ways that open up avenues of speculation (probably inadvertently). Overall his

discursive (but implied) strategies are rather evasive on sex and gender, associating women with reproduction (and men with generic humanness), though this is characteristic of masculine discourse in general, and requires (still more) feminist critique. This is to say that there is a lot omitted in Marx's work (though, as I have indicated, there is by no means a total blank). Whether a more thorough consideration of 'men' and 'women' as biological beings engaged in social production from pre-history to the present, i.e. from bare subsistence reproduction to surplus production in a capitalist money economy, was 'left' by Marx himself to Engels is a question to which we have no very specific hints on an answer, other than the answer that Engels himself produced (which was 'yes').

Engels

My view of *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* is that Engels adds 'woman' or women to Marxism ... and stirs as little as possible. While announcing that they are the first oppressed class, he actually does very little with them (in his theoretical account) after that, since a close reading of the text shows that it's men who make history. Indeed in Engels's work they do it in an overtly gendered (as well as apparently de-gendered way, i.e. in their guise as 'generic human [productive] subject'). This is because Engels assigns to men and women a version of the Darwinian reproductive imperative which he interprets in a highly masculinized way, i.e. men select multiple female partners, whereas women want to settle down monogamously with children. (Engels's naturalizing ascription of a desire for assured paternity to men, who seem developmentally to operationalize this at a certain, if unspecified, point in history, is frankly risible; the flip side of this, of course, is that Engels suggests that men have no domestic responsibilities by nature, meaning child-rearing.) The introduction of the Darwinian reproductive imperative and exogamous sexual selection actually creates a dual-systems Marxism (the 'production and reproduction of life') in Engels's text; given the obvious amendment to the 1859 Preface (from which Engels derived the 'materialist interpretation of history' as the canonical foundation of Marxism), it is perhaps surprising that commentators have not picked him up on this (whatever the 'second' system). Possibly one reason (besides the masculinized lack of interest in gender or in women as historically and politically significant) is that Engels himself did not advertise this nor really build on it. The net result of the text, on my reading, is that it reinscribes conventional masculinity, as Engels understood it, not just in terms of his (rather convenient) sexual stereotyping, but also because his overall discursive strategy is masculinist: women are made problematic in gender terms, by linking them existentially to pregnancy, and pregnancy to childcare in 'the family', whereas men are problematic not as gendered beings (or not very problematic, and then only from the point of view of women, which he clearly does not take particularly seriously even in his own stereotypical conception). Rather Engels sees men as active producers of both material things (outside the home) and social class (in the realm of 'real' politics), where historically he locates 'the action'. While he nods to a lost world of matriarchy, female power and home-centered production, it actually plays no active role in his version of historical development – it's there as nature (woman/family) when history (men/social class) overthrow it. In sum Engels secures a very conventional gender 'order' (i.e. power-differential) while appearing to do the opposite.

For detailed arguments, citations and references, see:

Men in political theory

By Terrell Carver

Men in political theory builds on feminist re-readings of the traditional canon of male writers in Political Philosophy by turning the 'gender lens' onto the representation of men in widely studied texts. It explains the distinction between 'man' as an apparently de-gendered 'individual' or 'citizen', and 'man' as an overtly gendered being in human society. BOTH these representations of 'man' are crucial to a clearer understanding of the operation of gender.

This book is the first to use the 'men's studies' and 'masculinities' literatures in rethinking the political problems that students and specialists in the social sciences and humanities must encounter: consent, obligation, patriarchy, gender, sexuality, life-cycle, and discriminatory disadvantage related to sex, age, class, race/ethnicity and disability. It does this by re-examining the historical materials from which present-day concepts of citizenship, individuality, identity, subjectivity, normativity and legitimacy arise.

The 10 chapters on Plato, Aristotle, Jesus, Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Marx and Engels show the operation of the 'gender lens' in different ways, depending on how the philosopher deploys concepts of men and masculinity to pose and solve classic problems. They can all be read independently and are as suitable for those just making the acquaintance of these classic writers as for those with specialist knowledge and interests.

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