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Feminist Theory

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A Critique of Marxist Feminism

Marxism is the political and economic philosophy where the concept of class struggle plays a central role in understanding society's allegedly inevitable development from bourgeois oppression under capitalism to a socialist and ultimately classless society (Dictionary.com). Marxist Feminists are a group of feminists that have tried to mold the ideas of Marxism into the shape of Feminism. Marxist Feminism has some seductive concepts, but because it tries to use a fundamentally economic theory to explain a fundamentally social problem overall it fails as a persuasive ideology.

Marxism states that capitalism is a system of exchange relations. In this system everything, including one's labor has a price and can be traded. Marxists believe that this system of exchange relations is inherently unequal. The bourgeois, who control the means of production, exploit the proletariat or the working class. Two other important concepts of Marxism are the fetishism of commodities and alienation. The fetishism of commodities is an idea that people in a capitalist society trade their labor power for a special commodity -- money -- and then use this commodity to purchase the product of other people's labor. This has two effects -- first, it causes people to treat relationships as physical objects, and second, it alienates the workers from the product of their labor (Wikipedia, Fetishism). Alienation in capitalist societies is due to the fact that in work, we each contribute to the common wealth but we can only express this fundamentally social aspect of ourselves through a production

system that is not social but privately owned, for which we function as instruments, not as social beings (Wikipedia, Alienation). There are four sources of workers alienation in Marxism. These are: alienation from the product of one's labor, alienation from themselves, alienation from others and alienation from nature (Tong, 100).

In Marxist Feminism, women's alienation from themselves is particularly acute because women are "others," alienated because they cannot see themselves as beings but can only see themselves through others.

Marxist Feminists believe that the primary source of women's oppression is from capital. Women are not allowed fully participate in the workforce so their access to capital is limited. Marxist Feminists posit that if women were fully allowed to join the workforce then they would no longer be oppressed.

Socialist Feminists, among others criticized this viewpoint. Other forms of Feminism more accurately hold men and more specifically patriarchy as the primary causes of women's oppression. Marxist Feminists conclusion that capitalism was almost exclusively the cause of women's oppression was overly simplistic, but not surprising given the fact that they were approaching the problem from only an economic standpoint.

Friedrich Engel, one of the fathers of Marxism, and to some extent Marxist Feminism wrote at length about gender inequality under capitalism. He came up with an indefensible theory as to the origins of patriarchy titled *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. In this work, he imagines hunter gather society as a matriarchy. Only once civilization developed into an Agrarian society did patriarchy become into existence. This idea was interesting, even if he had no evidence to back it up. But even as outlandish as this idea is, it does not come close to his assertion that a bourgeois wife was essentially a prostitute. This

concept is interesting, but in the end, it is flawed. Again, Engel fell into the trap of trying to use a fundamentally economic philosophy to explain a social and in this case religious institution. Engel completely misses the complexities of human interaction in reducing marriage to a relationship of only sex for money.

Marxist Feminists further extended Engel's view by introducing Carl Marx idea of "false consciousness" to feminism. Carl Marx defined false consciousness, stating, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness (Marx)." Marxist Feminists, and later other Feminists used this to try to explain women's acquiescence to patriarchy. While the concept of false consciousness gained wider acceptance, and was picked up by mainstream liberal feminists the concept fails to mold neatly from Marxism, again a economic theory, to patriarchy, a social problem. Here Marxist Feminists had to over simplify the situation for their theory to fit.

Marxist Feminists finally proved their total lack of connection to reality when they tried to propose "Wages for Housework." Attacked from all sides immediately after being proposed, this complete failure of a concept eventually collapsed from the weight of its own sheer ridiculousness. Intelligent Feminists attacked it because it would further isolate women from society, and everyone else attacked it because it was not a coherent idea. The largest of many problems associated with wages for housework is that there is no clear idea where the money to pay the wages would come from or how it would be determined who should receive these wages. Would anyone doing housework receive these wages including bachelors? The idea of wages for housework, however laughable, is not surprising, given its source. By applying a stupidly simplistic economic solution to a social problem Marxist

Feminists again failed to look at the larger picture.

Marxist Feminism has many flaws; most of these stem from its strictly mono-causal view of women's oppression as a purely economic problem. Where Marxism lays out its case by first establishing two classes, the bourgeois and the proletariat, Feminists tried to expand this to make the two classes of men and women. They did this ignoring the obvious problems with the fact that from an economic standpoint not all women exist in the same class. Women exist in all economic classes and therefore trying to use economic theory to explain their oppression fails.

Arguably, the problems with Marxist Feminism are not unique in the realm of Feminism. In fact, they appear any time economics and economic theories are used to explain the social problems arising from patriarchy. The social and political effects of Marxism are an extension of its economic philosophy. In contrast, the economic effects of patriarchy are an extension of its political and social situation. This does not make them unrelated, but it shows that if the world is to end the oppression of women then it must deal with the social problems and let the economics change because of the social changes and not the other way around.

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