

Gender, the Family and 'The German Ideology'

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The German Ideology (1845), often seen as the most materialistic of Marx's early writings, has been taken up mostly by structuralist and orthodox Marxists, but this work is especially important in terms of understanding Marx's views on gender and the family to Marxist-Humanists as well.

Certainly, the overall tone is very critical of the idealism of the Young Hegelians, but Marx and Engels's text is not the crude materialism of orthodox post-Marx Marxism. Instead, much of the material, especially that on gender and the family, can be read as an attempt to work out the new humanism that Marx called for in the *1844 Manuscripts*. Here, the mode of production, read relatively broadly to include much more than property, is the key to understanding social relations in particular societies.

As in Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx and Engels see the beginnings of class society as stemming from the division of labor. As the division of labor becomes more complex, different forms of property also come into existence, but most importantly, there is a social aspect that is at work as well. The mode of production and other material factors help to structure society:

- This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce. Hence what individuals are depends on the material conditions of their production (Marx and Engels 1998, 37).

Marx and Engels were not making a deterministic statement here. Both objective and subjective factors are important in understanding society and social change. Material conditions are very important to understanding society, but there is also a subjective element involved as well: "circumstances make men as much as men make circumstances" (Marx and Engels 1998, 62).

:: The Family and Class Society

Marx and Engels's discussion of the family revolves mostly around the origins of the family and class society. They see the two as tied together although not in a completely unilinear way. They argued that the original division of labor was based on the sexual division of labor in reproduction: "the division of labour, which was originally nothing but the division of labour in the sexual act, then the division of labour which develops spontaneously or 'naturally' by virtue of natural predisposition (e.g., physical strength), needs, accidents, etc., etc. Division of labour only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labour appears" (Marx and Engels 1998, 50).

It is important here to note their use of the word “natural.” Here as in other places within *The German Ideology*, they appear to be using this word in a dialectical sense. Natural in this case does not refer to a fixed essence; instead it refers to a state which appears natural to those within the society. In this sense, what is natural can change based on the society in question. Thus, there are objective and subjective factors that go into this determination of what is “natural.” Thus, when they state that there is a natural division of labor between the sexes, this does not mean that they are taking a biological view of gender. Instead, they appear to be arguing that biology only relates to the reproduction of the species and not necessarily the care of the young. This is instead left to “natural” factors that will vary with the type of social order in which they exist.

The statement about the division of labor really only appearing when the division between mental and manual labor takes place has been seen as problematic for a number of feminist scholars (Mies 1998, 51). As Mies notes, the first division of labor, that of procreation, is seen by Marx and Engels as “natural” while the second division of labor, the division between mental and manual labor is seen as the first social division of labor. This, she writes, is problematic: “by separating the production of new life from the production of the daily requirements through labour, by elevating the latter to the realm of history and humanity and by calling the first ‘natural’, the second ‘social’ they have involuntarily contributed to the biological determinism which we still suffer today” (Mies 1998, 52).

Mies is certainly correct in pointing to the ambiguity within Marx and Engels here. They appear to prioritize the division between mental and manual labor and see the procreation as primarily biological. Another reading is possible, however. As discussed above, natural for Marx and Engels does not necessarily carry the same meaning as in common discourse. Additionally, the priority that Marx and Engels give to the division between mental and manual labor is not necessarily that it is the first social relation, but that it is the first exploitative social relation. The division of labor only becomes oppressive when the worker loses control over the creative process which necessarily occurs with the division between mental and manual labor.

It is likely that Marx and Engels saw women’s procreative functions as only a biological and not a creative act as Mies argues. But this may not have been the case. In very early societies, Mies argues, women controlled their own fertility: “they did not simply breed children like cows, but they appropriated their own generative and productive forces, they analysed and reflected upon their own and former experiences and passed them on to their daughters. This means they were not helpless victims of the generative forces of their bodies, but learned to influence them, including the number of children they wanted to have” (Mies 1998, 54). While Marx and Engels were likely unaware of this at this time, there is no theoretical reason that bars incorporating this knowledge into their overall theory. If this is done, then women’s reproductive labor can be valued as creative labor and women’s oppression by men can also be noted. Thus, reproduction and childbirth only becomes a condition for the oppression of women when the dominant classes, usually led by men, decide when and how many children women will have.

While Mies may have overstated her case in terms of women’s reproductive control in early societies, the technology of today allows for women’s control over their reproductive abilities. Therefore, the material conditions for ending women’s oppression in terms of reproduction exist to a significant extent today. The necessary social conditions lag behind, however.

Marx and Engels continue their discussion on the division of labor. The division of labor in both production and reproduction has a dual character. There are both natural and social aspects involved:

- The production of life, both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a twofold relation: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relation—social in the sense that it denotes the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end ... Thus it is quite obvious from the start that there exists a materialist connection of men with one another, which is determined by their needs and their mode of production, and which is as old as men themselves (Marx and Engels 1998, 48-49).

Here Marx and Engels's focus is on the overall mode of production. At this point, they only take up the issue of production and not that of reproduction.

In a later passage, however, they discuss the inequalities within the family as well. For Marx and Engels, the family contains the beginnings of class society:

- The division of labour in which all these contradictions are implicit, and which in its turn is based on the natural division of labour in the family and the separation of society into individual families opposed to one another, simultaneously implies the *distribution*, and indeed the *unequal* distribution, both quantitative and qualitative, of labour and its products, hence property, the nucleus, the first form of which lies in the family, where wife and children are the slaves of the husband. This latent slavery in the family, though still very crude, is the first form of property, but even at this stage it corresponds perfectly to the definition of modern economist, who call it the power of disposing of the labour-power of others (Marx and Engels 1998, 51-52).

Here Marx and Engels are pointing out the importance of the family to the development of class society. As in other places in the text, they appear to be using "natural" only in the sense of spontaneous and unplanned instead of fixed by biology. The organization of the family is conditioned by the general development of society. Only certain family structures can occur at a definite stage of development.

Moreover, at this early stage of development, the family is a much more fundamental unit of society than in more developed societies. In an early stateless society, the family or clan is one of the few sources of authority. Since the social structure and material conditions mutually influence each other, the economic organization of society will have an effect on the family structure. Thus, the family will be one of the first places where the effects of the division of labor would be seen.

This first division of labor leads to the oppression of women and children in the family. They became subordinated to the men of the family since men are the ones to acquire property including the women and children. The male head of household has the power to dispose of the labor power of the other members of his family. This will be the germ of development for class antagonisms in the future. Further, Marx and Engels point out that the beginning of social

antagonism through the division of labor is not merely an internal relation. Instead relations with other families and perhaps even other tribes or clans could develop with similar antagonisms.

Thus, Marx and Engels are arguing at least indirectly that since the origin of class society exists in the family, a classless society cannot be created and maintained as long as familial and gender oppression exists. Any attempts at creating such a society without dealing with this problem would maintain the primary contradiction within the division between mental and physical labor and thus recreate the social antagonisms that a classless society was intending to eliminate. Therefore, although Marx and Engels do not discuss gender inequality in great detail, it is clearly something that must be dealt with in the process of creating a new society and not something that will automatically come about as a result of a socialist revolution.

:: The Bourgeois Family

Later, in their discussion and critique of Max Stirner, Marx and Engels view the family as historically conditioned. It is impossible to speak of the “family ‘*as such*’” (Marx and Engels 1998, 195). Instead, one must look at the historical context and especially the social relations of production. Marx and Engels criticize Stirner for not understanding the difference between the bourgeois ideal of the family and the phenomena of individual families that are being dissolved. They note the necessary hypocrisy of this form of the family, since the ideal of the bourgeois family also contains its opposite:

- The dissolute bourgeois evades marriage and secretly commits adultery; the merchant evades the institution of property by depriving others of property by speculation, bankruptcy, etc.; the young bourgeois makes himself independent of his own family, if he can by in fact abolishing the family as far as he is concerned. But marriage, property, the family remain untouched in theory, because they are the practical basis on which the bourgeoisie has erected its domination, and because in their bourgeois form they are the conditions which make the bourgeois a bourgeois... This attitude of the bourgeois to the conditions of his existence acquires one of its universal forms in bourgeois morality (Marx and Engels 1998, 194-195).

Here, Marx and Engels argue that the bourgeois family, based on “boredom and money” as the “binding link,” as well as its “official phraseology and universal hypocrisy” are necessary to the maintenance of capitalism (Marx and Engels 1998, 195). This form of the family “is made necessary by its connection with the mode of production, which exists independently of the will of bourgeois society” (Marx and Engels 1998, 195). It is a necessary complement to the exploitative relations of capitalism and inability to create a true community outside of the fetishized relations of production.

As Marx and Engels point out, the family has existed historically in other forms and will continue to exist as long as the repressive relations of capitalism remain (Marx and Engels 1998, 195). The contradictions inherent within capitalism make the bourgeois family a necessary structure. Thus, as Marx claims in his 1845 “Theses on Feuerbach,” “once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be destroyed in theory and in practice” (Marx 1998, 570). The oppressive relations in the family must be superseded in

order for the notion of human communality to correspond to its essence. It remains for us today to work out and overcome the contradictions inherent within the family and society more generally.

NOTES

Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. 1998. *The German Ideology*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

Mies, Maria. 1998. *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*. New York: Zed.