

Review: Marx on Gender & The Family

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Jenny Morrison provides an in-depth review of a recent publication in the Historical Materialism book series, Heather A. Brown's Marx on Gender and the Family.

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By Jenny Morrison (International Socialist Group)

It is surprising given the long history of engagement between Marxism and feminism that there exists few systematic studies of Marx's actual writings on women and gender, and that Heather A. Brown's *Marx on Gender and the Family: A Critical Study* is the first book length study on the issue. However, the importance of this work goes beyond merely filling an unusual academic gap but is symbolic of a dual turn, in feminist theory of a return to the possibilities of Marx, and in socialist theory of the need to struggle against all forms of oppression, including gender. This comes after a time when postmodern variants of feminism were widely regarded as having won the battle against Marxist-feminism, when it has been said that feminist theory is postmodern theory. Ironically, given the crude but common charge against Marxism of authoritarianism, postmodern forms of feminism had succeeded in setting themselves up as almost beyond question, sometimes even denying they are theory at all.

Yet despite the ever-recurrent claims of the death of Marxism, particularly as relevant to feminism, there has been a revival of debate in this area and the radicalisation of young women in the protests of 2010-2011 has left many looking for broader explanations. The resurgence of feminism should not be overstated: activist groups are small and tend to focus almost exclusively on sexual violence or media representation. Nonetheless, if the left is to develop it must renew its theory as it impacts on strategy and practice, and take up the space left by theories of difference unable to produce a coherent anti-capitalist feminism. The task of Marxist-feminists must be to produce a dialectical, non-dogmatic Marxism, a unitary theory which does not privilege either gender or class, one which is against economic reductionism as it is against gender reductionism. It is against this that Brown's work must be measured.

Taking this as the point of departure, *Marx on Gender and the Family* argues that although Marx did not develop a comprehensive theory of gender, his general theory did include it as a category for understanding society. Moreover, Brown argues there are insights that provide openings for a more developed Marxist-feminist theory. The book is accessibly written and clearly set out, with a more or less chronological progression through the works of Marx. Split into five main sections, it starts with an in depth examination of the 1844 Manuscripts, with a particular focus on the nature/culture dualism, before progressing through some of the later works from *The Communist Manifesto* to *Capital*. Importantly, the remaining sections are devoted to far less famous writings, through his journalistic works and the anthropological notebooks, some of which remain unpublished. These provide a more rounded view of Marx's concerns compared to the narrower projects of his better known writings, and bring much of the originality to Brown's work and a fresher view on Marx as they have been very little studied.

Brown in this is consciously reliant on the work of Kevin Anderson in *Marx at the Margins* as a model, where he examines the place of race, ethnicity and nationalism in Marx's writings. In particular he focuses part of his writings on the journalistic works and the anthropological notebooks in arguing that whilst Marx centres the study of capital, this does not make it exclusive and he has a dialectical understanding of social change that encompasses determinants such as race. Brown undertakes a similar project but foregrounds gender as the central category of

analysis. Marx has been widely dismissed by feminists as a unilinear theorist, thus to examine the place of gender in his theory and the openings for a renewal and development of Marxist-feminism today is certainly a valuable undertaking. However, the nature of the project opens the way to two potential problems: firstly it risks a focus on establishing an absolute truth of Marx's works rather than using his methodology to redevelop Marxism; secondly, such a work can cross into a defence of Marx as an individual. Both points must be borne in mind when considering Brown's work, in particular its relevance for renewing a non-dogmatic Marxism for the current day.

Flowing through Brown's analysis is the re-centering of the dialectic in Marx. In particular, she focuses on his understanding of the family and social relations as dynamic and historical, open to contradiction and change. Additionally, this perspective is carried over to his understanding of the categories nature/culture and its correlative woman/man. A common feminist critique of Marx has been that he sets up a hierarchical dualism between culture and nature, yet it is effectively demonstrated that he saw them as in a dialectical relationship, and that it can be overcome. Such an understanding then strongly points towards the ability to overcome gender binarism.

The early work of Marx, in particular that of the 1844 Manuscripts, have perhaps been the most studied area for feminist theorists given that they contain a direct discussion of gender and the position of women. Brown examines this in some detail, however, perhaps more significant is the focus on his mature works and, drawing particularly on the work of Raya Dunayevskaya, the dismissal of the idea of an epistemological break between Young Marx and Late Marx. The dynamic understanding of gender and the family as social constructs is continued as the underpinning principle through all of his work- even if he sometimes gives into the moralism of his day in specific comments on women.

Whilst understandably most study of Marx has focused on his theoretical work, he also produced many political writings that give insight into both his activism and his wider concerns beyond the narrower focus when he is trying to elucidate a particular theoretical point. However, it is here that Brown sometimes falls into the trap of defending Marx as an individual, most clearly when discussing his friendship, and dispute with, the Kugelmanns by trying to demonstrate he stood up to the sexist behaviour of his friend. The temptation to do this flows from the crude dismissals of Marxism by pointing out the sexism of Marx. Yet to say that Marx was certainly a product of his time and not free from oppressive attitudes and actions towards various women in his life is not a comment on whether Marxism as a method can understand the oppression of women. Thus any attempt to defend him is equally invalid from a theoretical perspective. More interesting is the illustration of Marx's own development through his involvement in struggle, as his political writings become more aware of women's collective subjectivity and ability to self-organise and overcome oppression and exploitation.

The final section of the book investigates the anthropological notebooks, where Marx took extensive notes on anthropological studies of his day. Brown enters the old debate of the relationship between the works of Marx and Engels, particularly relevant here given what is sometimes regarded as the foundational Marxist text on gender, in Engel's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. By returning to the original notebooks on which Engels was meant to have based his work, it is clearly demonstrated that there were differences in their approach to the question of family and gender. As Brown notes, for Marx there was no 'world-historic defeat' as he acknowledges that early communal societies were not unproblematic in terms of gender, and moreover does not take a reductionist approach towards the development of the family in different class societies. Instead Marx is able to accommodate the varying contradictions, improvements and regressions in gender relations and the family through various societies.

Again, what surfaces here is a dialectical approach that can account for historical specificity and change. Brown's analysis of the anthropological notebooks is extremely detailed, sometimes sacrificing readability, but the outcome is a very different Marx from the one charged with economic views. The notebooks are a glimpse into Marx's understanding of gender rather than a developed theory but a dynamic vision of the family is evident throughout.

Overall, from Marx on Gender and the Family emerges a dialectical Marxism, one that points to the beginnings of a unitary theory of gender and class. Noted throughout is that Marx did not systematically examine gender as a category and the aim of the book is not to try and construct one. Brown is not scared to highlight some of Marx's failings, in particular when he falls back on prejudice or moralism when discussing the oppression of women; although occasionally she does fall prey to the temptation to defend Marx as an anti-sexist, a pointless tactic and too

easily disproved. In the end the project should not be to rescue Marx or even the works of Marx but to examine his methodology. The most important aspect of the work is that in providing a systematic overview of the totality of Marx's work on the topic, Brown is able to indicate openings for analysis that can construct the base for the redevelopment of a Marxist-feminist theory.

Marx on Gender and the Family is currently available in hardback from Brill Publishers. A paperback edition will be released by Haymarket in July 2013.