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On Cultural Assumptions and Critical Theories

An examination of Freudianism and Marxism

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Question #1

No theory exists in a vacuum. Any proposition made about the world has, contained in it either implicitly or explicitly, various underlying assumptions about the way the world, logic, and/or observation work. Even most metaphysics, which attempt to describe the world on a supposedly basic level, tend to carry assumptive baggage. Any religious philosophy assumes its gospel truths; existentialists assume a deep disconnection between the subject and objects which the subject faces; the list goes on. Complicating things further, though the above assumptions mentioned are contained within the philosophies to which they apply, many times, relevant and nontrivial assumptions come from *without*, from the society in which the philosopher lives. For instance, one of these fundamental assumptions in Western history is the centrality of men. (That is, as opposed to women—the possible ambiguity in the sentence serves to illustrate the point.)[1] The majority of Western philosophies do not address or even state this assumption—they simply operate as if it is self-evident. For instance, when Aristotle describes woman as "misbegotten male", he is defining *her* in terms of *him*; she is in relation, relative, to his absolute.

Because the assumption of male centrality is encoded into society—less so in the present than in the past, but still so—any philosophy which calls it into question calls into question society, and is therefore a critical philosophy. This can be seen when we compare two apparently unrelated philosophies: Freudianism and Marxism. The former is not critical to nearly any extent, while the latter is; the former is fundamentally and explicitly built upon the idea that male, and not female, is the absolute, while the latter contains this assumption only occasionally, implicitly, and often in praxis as opposed to theory. What is more, when the fundamental tenets of

1 Another assumption, which I will be using in this essay for convenience and because my topics of study assume it as well, is the gender binary and heteronormativity; beyond this disclaimer, discussion of other sexualities and genders is outside the scope of this essay.

Freudianism are placed within a critical context, men are successfully de-centered—without losing the rest of the philosophy.

To understand why this is the case, we should first have an account of these tenets of Freudianism as it is. Freud himself lists two central views of psychoanalysis as, one, that unconscious thought plays a major or even primary role in mental processes, and, two, that sexual impulses are central in the human mind and actions (Freud, *A General Introduction*, 22-23). The former idea is innocuous enough—both women and men have minds and mental processes, and nothing is presented to suggest that the unconscious differs between the two groups. The latter idea, too, is in no way centered around either gender as stated—women and men both have sexual impulses, and sexuality plays a major part in both groups' lives. However, it can be seen how this may lead to male centrality.

To Freud, sexuality is fundamental to most of the mind. For example, according to Freud, the development of childhood curiosity, a part of development most people will agree is central in developing one's sense of the world and self, likely arises from sexual problems (Freud, *Basic Writings*, 595). And, to Freud, sex and sexuality is centered around the man—the female is analyzed solely as the not-male (Firestone, 58). Female genitalia is defined as the lack of a penis, and, without this appendage, women develop envy for it—this desire for a penis develops into sexual desire for a man and motherly desire for a baby (Freud, in Lehrman, 85). Moreover, the greater passivity of women is a result of turning away from her own clitoris to the male penis itself (86). Thus, Freudian theory accounts for heterosexuality, the mothering instinct, and female passivity as all resulting from the fact that feminine genitalia is, essentially, a lack of male genitalia, an emptiness for which the woman must compensate.

Freud goes further, however, with the castration and Oedipus complexes. In short, the male child sexually desires his own mother, and recognizes his father as a rival to this end; because of this, he wants to kill his father (the Oedipus complex). He also sees the genitalia of his sister or other women, with their *lack* of penis, and assumes that this lack is due to castration. Fearing this punishment may befall him by his father's hand (the castration complex), he represses his desires toward his parents. Successful repression results in the psychologically healthy or normal man (Freud, *Basic Writings*, 595 and Firestone, 52). Without going through this process and properly developing these complexes, a boy will become, in Freud's terms, psychotic. To restate the fundamental importance of this idea, it is necessary for a man's *sanity itself* that he develop with the assumption of his own normality. Now, this idea may be justifiable—the assumption of oneself as norm, which can be independent of gender, would lead to a boy assuming a difference in someone else's genitals as abnormal, which could lead to the complexes developing as Freud describes. This, however, would imply that a girl would find the *penis* abnormal and possibly undesirable or fearsome, being unlike her own genitalia. As we have already seen, this does not bear out in Freud's theories.

For female childhood development in particular, psychoanalytic thought[2] posits the Electra complex. In this theory, the girl initially desires her mother as the boy does, though when she discovers the difference between her genitalia and his, she feels castrated—she attempts to align herself with her father by seduction, and he represses her (Firestone, 59). This complex, intimately connected to the concept of penis envy, also fundamentally requires that the male genitalia be understood as the norm—otherwise, she would not sense a lack in herself which

2 It would be inaccurate to say Freud posits this idea—the Elektra complex was introduced by Carl Jung—but it is well within the early psychoanalytic school and so will be conflated with Freud's ideas in this paper. It should be noticed, though, that though the Oedipus complex is a central idea in Freud's work, he failed to account for the childhood development of half of the human population.

would need to be filled by the penis of her father. Further, this complex is essential to a woman's development—without it, she is abnormal, likely to be frigid or a lesbian (59), having not developed the desire for a child and/or man to replace her missing penis. Fundamentally, Freud and early psychoanalytical thought rest mental health largely on the proper development of sexuality, which is placed centrally on the idea of a man as norm. Without this idea, there is no development of sexuality, and so there is no account of mental development.

This is not to say, however, that Freud made any error in coming to these conclusions *per se*. Disregarding its questionable evidential truth and efficacy of psychoanalysis, these theories follow from the idea that man is the center of the human race, and woman is peripheral. If Freud include a part of, a critical analysis of gender in the West. And, indeed, when one incorporates his account of sexual/psychological development into such an analysis, it becomes possible to remove man from the center of the human race—to de-center him—while maintaining the structure of these childhood complexes (Firestone, 51-52). Shulamith Firestone presents such an account in *The Dialectic of Sex*.

To Firestone, one can save these ideas of Freudianism if one translates the idea of "penis envy" to something along the lines of *privilege envy*. In childhood, a person (both boy and girl) first identify with the mother, who loves them unconditionally and closely, and who must, along with the child, withstand the oppressive power of the father. However, the child also sees the power and freedom whence this oppression and distance arises. For the boy, the idea of identifying with this brutish figure is daunting, even terrifying—to the girl, it seems an opportunity to escape the drudgery and shackles of being her mother[3]. However, both end up falling into line: the boy reasons the benefits of being a man outweigh the sympathy he feels with

3 Firestone offers no reason behind boys' and girls' different reactions to their respective parents, that one should reluctantly go to masculinity, and the other only grudgingly give up the dream of it. One might claim it can be summed up in the cliché, "the grass is always greener on the other side".

his mother, and the daughter cannot keep up acting like a boy once society defines her as a woman at puberty. From here, we have modified versions of both Oedipus and Electra complexes—now, the penis that the boy fears losing and the girl envies is the power that men have in society. If there is any literality to Freud's ideas, it comes from muddled childhood understanding—for instance, if the girl does not understand where man's power comes from, she may identify it with the penis, which her father has and her mother lacks (Firestone, 52-60).

Thus, this idea, that man is the norm and woman an aberration, has been removed from the implicit assumptions of Freudian psychoanalysis—but, to keep it from falling apart, it has been replaced with the idea that man is privileged over women, and the explicit statement that woman is *treated* as an aberration. It has been made into a critical theory.

Having done this, though, we are not quite out of the woods. Critical theories such as Marxism can also contain difficult-to-unravel assumptions about male centrality. Unfortunately, analysis of the underlying assumptions of these theories becomes complicated quickly, because when theories place themselves in fundamental opposition to their objects of inquiry—that is, society—the assumptions of both theory and object come into play; sometimes, it is difficult to tell to which these assumptions belong. For instance, in one letter, Marx writes to Engels, "The first division of labor is that of man and wife in breeding children". At face value, the language Marx uses, "man" and "wife", seems to define woman relative to absolute man. However, Engels extends this with thoughts of his own: "The first class antagonism … [is] man and wife in monogamy, and the first class oppression … that of the female by the male sex" (Engels, 291). The latter quote, which uses the same terms as the first, applies rhetorical context which may indicate that these terms "man" and "wife" refer to the language of the monogamous system—as

per the line in marriage, “I now pronounce you man and wife”—and not the language of Engels or Marx.

Despite this difficulty, some conclusions can be drawn about Marxism. Marx distinguishes human beings from animals, though does not care about the initial difference; what matters to him is that humans begin to produce their means of existence[4] (Marx, in Kerbo, 101). Marx cares about humans primarily in their capacity as producers or workers, and, as both Marx and Engels make clear in their writings, women have equal or near-equal capacity to work in an industrialized society as men do. In fact, there are cases where men are less suited to the work (*The Woman Question*, 31). Women and men, then, are subsumed equally into Marx’s concept of the “proletariat” and the “bourgeois”, his fundamental division of contemporary society.

Marx and Engels speak significantly on the condition of women in modern society. Gender is, as mentioned above, the first class division in their eyes. After a prehistoric (and primitively communist) period of open sexual license and matrilineal genealogy, the advent of private property begins to necessitate that men, who have more private property being stronger and thus better primitive workers, defend their own interests by knowing definitively their own children; at the time, the only way to guarantee this is to impose strict monogamy (Engels, 289-291). From this point, men have economic and literal control of women and of themselves. In this way, Marx and Engels formulate patriarchy and the nuclear family as a result of private property and economics—and argue that to liberate women from this system, it is necessary to include women fully in public industry (Engels in Leacock, 295). The ends, in Marx and Engels’ eyes, of women and of male workers are essentially the same, and both will be solved with the institution of socialism and the abolition of private property.

4 It should be noted he uses the general “man” at a few points in this definition.

Only in subtle ways does the externality of women in Marxism come into view. In homogenizing people into a mass of workers, Marx ignores any other differences and peculiarities among those people, like race and gender, in favor of focusing on their ability to work. This often leads to issues, as it has in feminist theories which ignore or assume unimportant race and class. His analyses often make claims such as that the condition of women in any society is an indicator of the advancement of that society as a whole. This is a fine sentiment, but when regarding his ideas from a position of man-as-default, a position into which many ideas tend to drift, this clearly reduces woman to a symbolic barometer, more important in theory than in reality. In his later works, when he begins to focus on the concrete condition of the family, Marx subsumes woman into the family, reducing her personal struggle to an aspect of this economic cell (Mitchell, 21-22).

The ramifications of these issues appear after Marx's time: those who follow and carry on his work begin to make gender relations subsidiary or even ignore them entirely (Mitchell, 19-20). This fading of gender in practical Marxism can be seen largely as a result of the myopic view classical Marxism takes of oppression being only or very primarily based on economics. This fading, too, is destructive to both the women's and Marxist movements—Leacock argues that only united effort between movements fighting oppression of all types can effect change (Leacock, 296) and that abolition of marriage, necessary for women's liberation, will not automatically follow from socialist revolution (295)—more must be done, and women's causes must be focused on in themselves and not merely implicitly.

These issues in Marxism arise as a result of socialism's relative ambivalence towards women's issues; they are not a fundamental part of the philosophy. It would be, and is, not a particularly disturbing thing to remove them from the rhetoric and practice of Marxism. In fact,

Simone de Beauvoir does just this. Despite being known primarily as an existentialist philosopher, her account of history in *The Second Sex* draws heavily on a critical Marxist perspective, which she incorporates into her philosophy of feminism. In fact, she copies nearly verbatim Engels' own account of the development of the patriarchy as a result of private property, making some modifications and notes but leaving the main theory intact.

What, then, can we draw from these philosophies? We can draw the fact that, in a society where men are situated as the norm, to de-centralize men, one must question society and situate oneself in a critical theory. But this is not necessarily enough—unless we are focused specifically on the topic of women (As Marx and Engels are sometimes,) or particularly mindful of our rhetorical and logical assumptions, as Firestone is in her reformulation of Freudianism, it is easy to fall back into the trap. To be outside the normal assumptions of society is a constant, if worthwhile and necessary, effort.