A Marxist Theory of Women’s Nature*

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Debates about women’s nature are very old but far from over. In fact they have acquired a new urgency with the rise of the women’s movement and with the dramatic increase in the number of women in the work force. Conservatives claim that there is a distinct women’s nature that puts limits on the extent to which the traditional sexual/social roles can and should be altered. Feminists usually reject the idea, correctly pointing out that it has been used to justify women’s oppression for thousands of years.

In this article I attempt to develop a Marxist approach to the question. Though such an approach is nowhere explicitly taken by Marx or Engels, it is a plausible development of their views. Marx held human nature to be determined by the social forms of human labor. I will bring out his general realist methodology and his perspective on the relation between the biological and the social. Given my interpretation of the facts about psychological differences between the sexes and the probable dependence of these differences on the sexual division of labor, this approach entails that women probably do have distinct natures. (It similarly entails that men probably have distinct natures since there is no reason to take men as the norm.) However, contrary to the usual assumption, it does not follow that sexual/social roles cannot or should not be radically altered, for men’s and women’s natures are socially constituted and historically evolving. Marx’s approach, though novel in certain respects, accords with the methodology employed in biological classifications. I shall discuss two objections: that my account underemphasizes the biological facts and that it underemphasizes social/historical factors. On my account of women’s nature, this nature can change, though it will not be easy, but nothing follows about how women ought or ought not to live. I shall conclude by considering contrasts between my Marxist approach to women’s nature and Marx’s approach to human nature.

I

Just as the nonhuman natural world consists of biological, chemical, and physical structures for which different sorts of explanations are appropriate,

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so there are many levels of explanation appropriate to human beings. The nature of a human being as a biological being would be the genotype. The philosophical question of human nature is of the nature of human beings qua social beings. According to Marx’s theory, human beings have certain basic needs and capacities which are biological in origin but to some extent socially constituted:1 “Hunger is hunger but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth.”2 Some human needs and capacities are unique to human beings, but even those that are not take uniquely human forms. As new needs and capacities are continually being created, biology remains an important determining factor, but human life progressively becomes less directly tied to its biological base.

Since human needs and capacities are expressed, shaped, and even created through the activity of satisfying needs (i.e., through labor), Marx concentrated on the form of labor characteristic of the human species. Though this species can be distinguished from others on a number of criteria, Marx says that human beings in fact begin to distinguish themselves from other species when they begin to produce their means of subsistence. Because the labor of society is institutionalized into sets of social practices and social relations, by their labor people are thereby producing their whole life. The general capacity of human beings to labor in a social and purposive way takes a variety of specific forms throughout history which in turn affect and even create other human needs and capacities.

Now obviously there are biological structures that make possible the kinds of labor that human beings do. However, the relation between biology and activity in human beings differs from that in other species in two ways: first, human biology makes possible more than just a narrow range of behavior, even within a particular historical period; and second, rather than determining the forms of human labor, human biology does no more than make possible its forms. Our large brain size, the basis of the flexibility and plasticity of human behavior and consciousness, resulted from evolution, a major determinant of which was labor. This is the basis of Engels’s remark that “labor created man himself.” On Marx’s theory, labor is the key to an explanation of social life and social change. Since this was his concern, he emphasized the labor and not the biology.

Compare the methodology employed in biological classifications: animals are classified into the same or different species not simply on the basis of their similarities and differences but also according to the

1. As is well known, one of the most controversial areas of Marxist scholarship is whether Marx had a theory of human nature in his later work and, if so, whether it is significantly different from his earlier one. The interpretation I give below is consistent with both his early and his later work (as indicated by references). So there is some common theory of human nature, although there are also differences between his early and late ideas which are not relevant to my concerns in this paper.

importance of these features within biological theory. For this reason, Chihuahuas and St. Bernards are classified as belonging to the same species, although there are greater differences between them than there are between many dogs and wolves. In analogous fashion, the differentiating characteristic of social beings should be determined by its importance in social theory. As the forms of human labor (and the resultant social practices and institutions) change, new mental and physical capacities are developed, some remain undeveloped, and others are destroyed. Hence different behavioral and psychological generalizations will be true of people who do different sorts of labor in different modes of production.

A nominalistic-empiricist approach would leave the discussion of human nature at that. However, I take Marx to have a realist approach to the philosophy of the natural and social sciences. Realists maintain that the concept of a nature—stripped of outmoded metaphysical assumptions—often plays an important explanatory role in answer to such questions as, Why do the generalizations hold? and What is the basis of the observed similarities? Biological theories, which back up some generalizations and not others, should provide some account of the mechanisms that generate the regularities. For example, realists argue that it is necessary to posit some underlying structure, common to the things defined as one species, that generates the disjunctive set of properties defining a species and causes variations in different individuals within that species.3 (This demand is satisfied by the concept of the gene pool.) In traditional terminology, the set of properties which justify the use of the common term is called the nominal essence; the internal constitution which generates these manifest properties in accordance with laws is called the real essence.

Marx assumed the same perspective on the social world. He believed that the distinction between accidental and lawful generalizations applied to social phenomena and that certain social entities had natures, saying repeatedly that science was necessary to uncover the hidden laws of motion of capitalist society. Socioeconomic classes are not mere collections of individuals with some common economic feature—not classes simply in the logical sense. The realist methodology implies that there must be certain characteristic differences in the psychophysical structures of people who do very different sorts of labor in different modes of production to account for the observed personality and behavioral differences between them.4 These psychophysical structures would generate and explain a wide range of human behavior within that mode of production, which

the transhistorical features of human beings would not be able to do. To say in detail what these historically specific structures are and how they work would require a more adequate psychological theory than presently exists, one that integrates social and historical factors. However, an explanation of the varieties of human personality and behavior requires some such hypothesis of historically specific structures. This indicates a line of future research.5

Talk of “determining structures” is not inconsistent with Marx’s conception of human beings as historical agents. Individually and collectively, human beings often do what they do because of their beliefs, desires, and purposes. Human beings are free in this sense. But Marx stresses that human freedom is exercised only within certain constraints—set by social, historical, and economic conditions as well as biological facts. Talk of social groups with natures is a way of bringing out those constraints. For example, we can better predict John Smith’s economic behavior by knowing that he is a capitalist than by knowing his preferences, skills, personality, and character traits.

The psychophysical structures produced by the sorts of labor that people do and the resultant social relations would constitute the nature of human beings qua social beings. Although there are certain features common to these structures, they vary as a whole from one mode of production to another. Marx is denying that there is a human nature in the traditional, transhistorical sense. On his view, however, there are historically specific forms of human nature, that is, human nature specific to feudalism, to capitalism, to socialism, and so on. In traditional terminology, the (variable) psychophysical structures would be the (variable)

5. Some fascinating work along these lines was done by the early Soviet psychologists, Lev Vygotsky and A. R. Luria, who defined psychology to mean “the science of the socio-historical shaping of mental activity and of the structures of mental processes which depend utterly on the basic forms of social practice and the major stages in the historical development of society” (Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976], p. 164). In a study of Central Asian peasants in the early 1980s, they discovered significant differences in the mode as well as the content of cognition between those living on a collective farm for two years and those engaged in traditional peasant agriculture. Specifically, the latter had difficulty with simple syllogisms while the former did not; and the latter classified objects according to what Luria called a “graphic-functional” mode as opposed to the “abstract-theoretical” mode used by the former. In attempting to give a material basis for his approach, Luria made innovative contributions to neuropsychology. Unfortunately, they did not explore the connections between social structure and noncognitive aspects of mental life. These seminal ideas have never really been developed. They were suppressed in the Soviet Union until recently and remained unknown in the West until many years later. (See also A. R. Luria, The Working Brain: An Introduction to Neuropsychology [New York: Basic Books, 1973], and Higher Cortical Functions in Man [New York: Basic Books, 1966]; Lev Vygotsky, Thought and Language [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982]). Also along these lines, Alfred Sohn-Rethel presents a convincing though speculative case for the thesis that the human capacity for abstract thinking was dependent on forms of commodity production (Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology [London: Macmillan Publishers, 1978]).
real essence of human beings qua social beings, and the forms of personality and behavior to which they give rise would be the nominal essence.

This acceptance of natures in the social world implies that, contrary to traditional assumptions, natures can change. Even for biological natures, however, the assumption that natures must be unchanging became less plausible after the discovery of evolution. If species can be understood as evolving sorts of things, why must natures be understood as unchanging? In Marx’s view, the contrast of the social with the natural and unchanging is particularly inappropriate to human beings since they are by nature social beings with a history.

II

Let us try to apply this approach to the question of whether women (and men) can be said to have distinct natures. Distinct sex-linked natures are supposed to account for (and to justify) the distinct social roles of women and men. It is important to see first of all that the defining biological differences between men and women cannot by themselves play this explanatory role, much less the justificatory one. A woman is defined as a typical member of the female sex, which is distinguished from the male sex by its ability to conceive and bear children. Whether these biological differences cause the social differences is an empirical question that we shall discuss shortly. However, to say that men and women have distinct natures so defined would be to utter a tautology. We are looking for the nature of women and men as social groups, not as biological groups.

Do, then, men and women as social beings have distinct natures? If there are generalizations subsumable under a theory, explanatory of behavior distinctive of a given social group, this suggests that the group has a distinct nature. Indeed there are many generalizations we can make about women’s behavior and roles within given cultures and many that are true cross-culturally as well. Compared to men, women spend more time taking care of children and doing other household tasks; they have less social, economic, and political power in society at large and in almost every subgroup in society; their work outside the home, if any, is usually related to the work they do inside the home; they tend to cry more easily, dress and adorn themselves distinctively, tend to have distinct recreations and pleasures, and so on.

What is the explanation? Discrimination and direct social pressure are undoubtedly part of it. But are there differences between men and women themselves that underlie the behavioral differences? Many claim that biological differences between the sexes are the most important part of the explanation.6 However, it is highly implausible that biological differences could directly determine the social differences. If biological

facts are critical determinants of sexual/social roles, the connection is most likely to run through psychology; that is, biological differences cause or predispose psychological differences, which in turn cause differences in social roles. The first question, then, is whether there are psychological differences between the sexes that are relevant to their respective social roles: for example, that women are more nurturant than men and hence are more appropriate caretakers of children. If there are such differences, the next question will be about their source.

Both these questions are controversial, even among the experts. Despite this and my own serious reservations about much of the research, I believe that research to show that there exist statistically significant psychological sex differences of a sort that are relevant to the different social roles men and women play.

Any position regarding the source of these differences is necessarily somewhat speculative since, by and large, the researchers look only for statistically significant relationships and do not try to establish cause and effect. The prevailing hostility among academic research psychologists to any theoretical framework makes it difficult to assess the data since the significance of the data and even what needs to be explained is to some extent dependent on a theory. But the following findings strongly support the view that social factors are the primary determinants: (1) Black males and white females, different biologically but with similar social handicaps, are similar in patterns of achievement scores and fear

7. These reservations are based on the following objections: First, the research is confined to artificial situations and narrow cultural contexts. Second, it concentrates on statistically significant differences and ignores the magnitude, overlap, and importance of the features. And third, it lacks a theoretical framework with which to evaluate the findings.

8. For example, women tend to have greater needs to be close to people (L. E. Tyler, The Psychology of Human Differences [New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1965]; E. Maccoby, “Sex Differences in Intellectual Functioning,” in The Development of Sex Differences, ed. E. Maccoby [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1966], pp. 25–55), to be less aggressive (E. Maccoby and L. Jacklin, The Psychology of Sex Differences [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974]), more suggestible (Tyler; Maccoby), to be motivated more by a desire for love than by a desire for power (L. Hoffman, “Early Childhood Experiences and Women’s Achievement Motives,” Journal of Social Issues 28 [1972]: 129–55), to have greater verbal and less visual/spatial ability (Tyler; Maccoby; Maccoby and Jacklin). These differences are clearer and more significant among adolescents and adults than among young children.

of success. The same physiological state can yield very different emotional states and behavior, depending on the social situation. Adrenalin produces a physiological state very much like that present in extreme fear, yet subjects injected with it became euphoric when around another person who acted euphorically and very angry when around another person who acted very angrily. Thus even if sex hormonal differences between men and women affect brain functioning, as some psychologists contend, it does not follow that there necessarily will be consistent emotional and behavioral differences between men and women. (3) Different behavioral propensities, thought by many to be biologically based, disappear given certain social conditions. In one study, when both sexes were rewarded for aggressive behavior, the sex difference disappeared. (4) Studies of hermaphrodites show that the crucial variable determining their gender identity is neither chromosomal sex nor hormones administered pre- or postnatally but "the consistency of being reared as feminine, especially in the early years." (5) Psychological sex differences are least pronounced in early childhood and old age, when sex-role stereotypes are least powerful. Furthermore, the principle of methodological simplicity supports taking environmental factors as decisive. We have at present ample evidence of environmental shaping of sex-differentiated behavior, so ample in fact that it is sufficient to account for the cognitive and personality differences we observe in children and adults. Although it is possible that future research will discover biological factors as well, there is no reason to expect this will happen.

The social roles of men and women that are related to psychological sex differences are not universal cross-culturally, but they are very prevalent.


S. Schachter and J. E. Singer, "Cognitive, Social and Physiological Determinants of Emotional State," Psychological Review 69 (1962): 379–99. A philosopher might argue that a finer analysis would show that it was not the same physiological state which yielded the different results but two different states. Regardless, the study shows that the social situation is more important than the physiological factor.


14. Romer, pp. 7, 124. Studies show that parents (as well as society) project fewer clear sex-role expectations on babies than on young children and adolescents. However, such stereotypes are projected throughout the human life: there is no time that can safely be said to be prior to socialization. Studies show that parents describe newborns in sex-stereotypic ways, even though hospital records show no objective differences, and that parents behave differently toward boy and girl babies even though they are unaware of it. Cited in ibid., pp. 139–40, nn. 3, 4, 5, 6.
Sex-differentiated socialization patterns also show little cross-cultural variation, with girls being trained for nurturance and responsibility and boys for achievement and self-reliance in both developed and underdeveloped societies.¹⁵ This strongly suggests that many, though not all, of the psychological differences between men and women are very prevalent, though not universal, cross-culturally. They are not universal to all women even within this culture. Something like the following is probably true: there is a common core of psychological traits found more among women than among men throughout the world, but women belonging to different cultures or subcultures have different subsets of this common core of traits. Though there is not enough rigorous cross-cultural psychological research to say for sure, this opinion accords with the anthropological data we do have.¹⁶

There seem, then, to be several levels of generalizations (sociological, psychological, etc.) that are distinctive of women. By itself, however, this by no means implies that there is a distinct women’s nature. As we saw in our discussion of taxonomy, the differences must be of a kind that is theoretically important. Following Marx’s approach, we should expect psychological differences to be connected to differences in the sorts of labor that women do in society and to the resulting differences in social relations. Universally there is and has always been a sexual division of labor. Although there are some variations as to what labor each sex does, men generally have primary responsibility for subsistence activities; women’s contribution to this varies. What does not vary is that, whatever else they do, women have primary responsibility for child care and most of the everyday household work. Their contribution to subsistence depends on its compatibility with child care.¹⁷

Several cross-cultural studies support the Marxist assumption that it is women’s distinctive labor and the different social relations resulting from it that are critical in determining these personality differences.¹⁸

¹⁶. Margaret Mead’s ground-breaking research provides dramatic examples of societies where sex roles are very different from those familiar to us (Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies [New York: William Morrow & Co., 1935]).

¹⁷. See Judith K. Brown, “An Anthropological Perspective on Sex Roles and Subsistence” (in Sex Differences, ed. Michael S. Teitelbaum [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1976], pp. 122–38), for a survey of the research on sex roles and subsistence activities. “Though men typically make a predominant contribution . . . there are numerous societies in which women make a predominant contribution” (p. 125). This variation is not random but seems to depend on two other activities which are universally sex-linked. Warfare is everywhere a predominantly male activity, and child care is everywhere a predominantly female activity. Women do more subsistence work when men are occupied by warfare and when it is compatible with child care responsibilities. Thus societies in which women predominate in subsistence activities are those which depend almost entirely on gathering or hoe cultivation.

Striking parallels exist between cultural and sexual differences; that is, cultures differ along the same lines as those along which men and women differ in most societies. Some cultures exhibit the sort of behavior and personality usually considered masculine: everyone tends to be independent, achievement oriented, and assertive (although women still are less so than men are in the culture). In other cultures everyone tends to be compliant, obedient, and responsible—the sort of personality associated with women. Critical for us is that the differences in the “personalities” of cultures are correlated with different economies. Where animal husbandry and agriculture are the primary sources of subsistence, obedience and responsibility are essential whereas experimentation and individual initiative would be dangerous. But societies which depend largely on hunting and fishing benefit from experimentation and individual initiative and are less threatened by disobedience and irresponsibility. Women in the latter societies tend both to fish and to have their more traditional responsibilities. Though more “masculine” than men and women in other cultures, they are less “masculine” than men in their own cultures. It seems plausible to say therefore that the differences between men and women can be explained by the different sorts of labor that they do.

Within our own society, certain psychological differences between young black and young white women lend support to the hypothesis. While wealthy black adolescent girls share the traditional (white) version of femininity,19 black adolescent girls from poor and working-class families (i.e., the majority) accept the very different values for women of strength and independence.20 It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the psychological differences between young black and young white women reflect the fact that black women have historically almost always been employed outside the home.

Now the Marxist view is not that there is a direct causal connection between the type of labor people do and their personality structure. Rather, the type of labor people do puts them into certain social relations, and these relations are institutionalized into sets of practices, institutions, cultural agencies, and so on. In the case of the sexual division of labor, the most important of these institutions is the family. Women are first of all raised primarily by a woman in a family. They then usually have a family of their own. Although fewer women today are full-time domestic workers than in the past, they still tend to think of their primary work and role as that of wife and mother. Their role in the family helps keep them in an inferior economic and social position. Their work outside the family, if any, is most often related to their role inside the family. Even the rare woman who both has an untraditional job and does not have a family is still shaped by the social and cultural institutions from which


she is deviating. Men who for a long time do unskilled work and are
treated in a paternalistic manner at work are also psychologically affected
by it, but the effect is counteracted by their dominant role in the family
and by the ideology of male supremacy.

The Marxist view then is that the different generalizations true of
men and women can be explained by the sexual division of labor insti-
tutionalized into sets of practices and social and cultural institutions and
that this in turn can be subsumed under a theory explaining the sexual/
social division of labor. The two explanations are provided by different
aspects of historical materialism. In a society where there was a significantly
different sexual division of labor, different generalizations would be true
of men and women. In a society where there was no sexual division of
labor, there would probably be few if any generalizations that were true
of men but not women, except biological ones, and there would be fewer
even of these. (I shall return to this later.)

The generalizations true of women and not men describe emotions
and behavior that reflect specific cognitive/affective structures more often
found among women. My contention is that there is probably a common
core of psychological traits found more often among women than among
men throughout the world, of which women of different (sub)cultures
have different subsets. The cognitive/affective structures generate the
different sets of traits under different conditions. Although our knowledge
at this point is too meager to say much about these structures, an adequate
explanation of the differences requires that we posit such structures.
What we need is a psychological theory supplemented by social and
historical considerations of the kind discussed here. In the traditional
terminology the cognitive/affective structures would be the real essence;
the disjunctive set of traits would be the nominal essence. Although the
underlying structures which give rise to the different traits would more
properly be called the distinct nature of women, for ordinary purposes
the nature of women could be taken to be the systematically related sets
of properties to which these structures give rise.

That these properties are not universal is not a reason to reject the
claim that they constitute a nature. This might seem surprising, but
actually it accords with the approach used in taxonomy. Contrary to
Aristotelian essentialism, classifications made in biology do not require
that the defining characteristics be individually necessary and jointly
sufficient. The actual distribution of properties among organisms is such
that most taxa names can be defined only disjunctively. Any of the disjuncts

21. Two recent and important books, Dorothy Dinnerstein's The Mermaid and the
Minotaur (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) and Nancy Chodorow's The Reproduction of
Mothering (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), fit this approach in that they
argue that the near universal fact that women "mother" (in a psychological as well as the
many physical ways) is the key to adult male and female personality structures. I disagree,
however, with many of the specifics of the theories—in particular, the primary emphasis
put on early childhood and on the psychological aspects of the division of labor.
is sufficient, and the few necessary properties are far from sufficient. This makes most concepts of so-called natural kinds what are called "cluster concepts." There seems no reason to apply stricter criteria in the social sphere. The account given here of women's nature makes it just such a cluster concept.

There is, then, what Marxists would call a dialectical interaction between women's labor and their nature. The sexual/social division of labor is the cause of the distinctive cognitive/affective structures that constitute women's nature, and these structures are at least a partial cause of a variety of personality traits and behavior distinctive of women, including the sorts of labor they do.

III

Let me digress for a bit to consider the objection that my arguments show that it is the biological differences between men and women and not social factors that account for these personality differences. After all, it might be argued, it is the fact that women can bear and nurse children that is the basis of the sexual/social division of labor. So, even if the latter plays some causal role as well, it is not the most basic explanation.

This point is interesting but mistaken. Not every biological difference constitutes a difference in natures. It depends on how significant causally the difference is and hence how explanatory it is. We have already seen that women are not the same at all times and in all cultures and that cultures as a whole exhibit differences similar to those between men and women in most (though not all) cultures. The biological facts—just because they are universal—cannot explain these social and historical variations. A theory which could explain them would have to be a social-historical theory. Thus, although it is obviously true that the sexual division of labor rests on the reproductive differences between the sexes, these do not constitute a difference in the natures of men and women as social beings. The significance of the biological differences depends on social-historical facts and, moreover, is maintained in every society by complicated social practices. Hence the difference in natures is primarily social and historical.

Consider this example (which I would claim to be analogous): suppose that the division of slaves into house and field workers was based entirely on the slaves' size and strength, bigger and stronger slaves becoming field workers, smaller and weaker ones becoming house workers. It is well known that there were differences in attitudes and, to some extent, personality between house and field slaves. What was the cause of these differences? Most writers point to the differences in work, working conditions, and social relations of house and field slaves. If different social conditions would have produced different psychological results, then it would be mistaken to point to the physical differences as the cause—even though they were the basis on which house and field slaves were placed in their respective social conditions.
Now some might try to extend my argument and claim not only that the differences in natures between men and women are social and historical in origin but also that the very division into men and women is social and historical in origin. After all, there is an enormous physical variety among infants and among adults. And physical similarities and differences do not by themselves determine any particular division into groups. Rather it is the significance that society gives to the physical characteristics that does this. Similar arguments regarding the classification of humanity into races are generally accepted today by informed people.

Though interesting, this argument goes wrong in its assumption as to what constitutes a biological or “natural” distinction as opposed to one that is social or historical in origin. Nothing is a “given fact of nature” in the sense presupposed in the argument. It is true that it is the significance of physical similarities and differences, rather than the physical similarities themselves, that determines a classification. Nevertheless, given that the sex difference is what allows for physical reproduction of most kinds of things, and that the distinction between things that reproduce sexually and those that reproduce by some other means is a very important one in biology, the division into two sexes has great importance for biological theory. The basis of the division into two sexes, then, is much the same as the division into species. Why should the sexual division not be called a natural distinction as well? Only if human beings were to cease to reproduce themselves sexually might the distinction between men and women cease to be of critical biological importance and hence cease to be a fundamental biological distinction. (Since they still could reproduce in the old way, however, it would still have some biological importance.) Even if that should come to pass, it would not show that until then the distinction between men and women was not a biological one. What is social and historical in origin is what is made of the distinction.

IV

It must not be forgotten that the similarities between men and women are greater than their differences. These similarities constitute their common human nature, as both biological and social beings. But within the sociohistorical category of human beings, I have argued that there are sex-differentiated natures. An individual woman will have this women’s nature as a part of her human nature. She is, of course, a particular woman and more than just a woman. Aside from being human, she is, among other things, of a particular social class, race, and culture. These are categories that cut across sex lines, and some will be as important as her sex or more important. Given the methodology I am using, this means that every individual has or is constituted by several natures. There is no contradiction in this. It simply shows that there are several different sorts of facts about people and that these require different sorts of explanations, however these facts and explanations are ultimately related. There need be no conflict between the different sorts of explanations;
different areas of a woman's behavior can be explained by different aspects of her total nature. In certain conditions, however, there might be a conflict. A woman who is a wife and mother and also a wage worker will have needs and propensities based on these social relations. These will sometimes conflict, such as when she has a union meeting and responsibilities at home at the same time. Particular conditions will also make a difference: if there is a strike going on she will be more likely to go to the union meeting than at other times. We should look for theories to explain under what conditions each factor will be most important, how factors interact, and how these correlations could change given other conditions. Our theories should also explain why all this is so. Different individuals may respond somewhat differently to the same factors because of the particular conditions of their lives and their particular socialization experiences. The theories are about groups, not individuals. This is why many of the generalizations about the different social groups of which a person is a member are statistical and not universal.

It is important to make clear that the sense in which women have a distinct nature does not carry many of the usual implications of such a statement and has no implications to which feminists should object. This nature is not fixed and inevitable; natures in this sense can change. Although there is a biological element as part of its basis, the crucial determinants are not biological but social. (As we saw, even if it were entirely biological this would not make it inevitable. Not only can the biological facts be changed but also, much more important in the short run, their effects can be altered by human intervention.) That there is a distinct women's nature in my sense does not mean that every woman has this nature. The cluster of psychological traits that constitutes the nature of women as social beings need not belong to all biological females, though it would be an unusual woman to have none of the traits. Though a women's nature would explain some of women's behavior (indeed this is required for use of the concept of nature), it would not necessarily be more determinant than other aspects of her nature. Thus a woman could, over all, have more in common with a man who shared other aspects of her nature than with another woman with whom she shared this women's nature. Most importantly, a women's nature in this sense carries no moral implications about how women ought or ought not to live. Whether a type of behavior characteristic of women is morally or socially desirable is a normative issue. A further normative question is whether desirable traits should be divided up along sexual lines. Personally, I see no justification for this. In my opinion some traits more characteristic of women, such as nurturance, are desirable for everyone, while others, like passivity, are undesirable for everyone. But any opinion on this would need argumentation independent of the facts about how men and women tend to behave. The existence of socially constituted sex-differentiated natures might be relevant to the normative questions but hardly decisive.
Though talk of women’s nature does not, on my account, imply that it is immutable, it does imply that it is not easily changed. The Marxist conception of a thing’s nature is of something underlying and explanatory of its observable behavior. But being explanatory is not sufficient to be part of a thing’s nature. Only those traits belong to a thing’s nature that are systematically related, explain a variety of systematically related behavior, and are subsumable in a theoretical framework. Such features do not easily and suddenly change. A sexual division of labor with resultant psychological sex differences has been near to universal, despite variations. Today, however, things may be changing. Only a small minority of Americans (11 percent) live in the traditional nuclear family of breadwinning father, homemaker mother, and two or more children. Forty-five percent of the work force is made up of women. On the other hand, the jobs that women do for wages tend to be related to their traditional and subordinate social role: they assist, nurse, teach, serve, and clean up after others in their wage work as well as in the home. Moreover, women still do most of the parenting and housework whether or not they do wage work.\textsuperscript{22} How much this can change within capitalism is a complicated and controversial question. And how quickly the psychological differences between the sexes would disappear if the social differences were removed remains to be seen.

In neither capitalist nor noncapitalist societies has the entry of women into paid labor been sufficient to change traditional sex roles.\textsuperscript{23} Although one part of the traditional sexual division of labor has changed, the most important part has not. Women are oppressed by their “double duty” in both forms of society. That women working outside the home still do most of the child care and housework has to be attributed in part to psychological differences between the sexes. Even women leading fairly untraditional lives still tend to hold many of the traditional assumptions, values, expectations, and self-conceptions on a deep level. So I do not think the psychological changes will be so rapid as to refute my talk of them as “natures.” On the other hand, these psychological attributes seem to be very much dependent on the objective, economic power relations between men and women. Thus, in the working class, where women’s wages are a higher proportion of family income than they are in the middle class, studies show that women gain more power from employ-

\textsuperscript{22} A recent study showed that women wage workers work an average of sixty-nine hours per week (forty paid, twenty-nine unpaid), while male wage workers work an average of fifty-three hours per week (forty-four paid, nine unpaid) (cited in E. Currie, R. Dunn, and D. Fogarty, “The New Immiseration: Stagflation, Inequality and the Working Class,” \textit{Socialist Review} 10 [1980]: 7–32).

And even women working in low-level traditional women’s jobs have more feminist consciousness than do full-time housewives. Thus there is a basis for believing that, to the extent that the sexual division of labor in society was reduced or eliminated, psychological sex differences would follow suit. As these social changes occur we are likely to see contradictions develop in the psychic structures of men and women. Using “contradiction” in the Marxist sense of structures with incompatible tendencies, the presence of contradictions in periods of change is perfectly consistent with the idea that these structures constitute natures. The difficulty of changing male and female natures does not imply that we should not try to change them. On the contrary, if they are judged to be undesirable, as I believe they are, the difficulty of change would entail that extra efforts ought to be made.

V

In the concluding section of this article I should like to explore a contrast between Marx’s approach to human nature and my approach to women’s nature. Although my perspective has been based on Marx’s theory of human nature, there is an interesting difference on one point. The fact that human beings cannot, under capitalism, fulfill certain capacities unique to human beings is taken by many Marxists (and Marx) to be a criticism of capitalism. The fact that these aspects of their nature will be fully realized only in socialism and communism is taken to be a key reason why socialist and communist societies are in some sense better than all previous ones. Yet I have rejected any normative implications of my account of women’s nature. Why is it good that human beings should fulfill their nature or aspects of their nature? And if it is good, why doesn’t it follow that women should fulfill their natures too? Or is this Marxist-feminist position I have developed lacking in any consistent theoretical basis? It says that natures should be developed when I like what is part of the natures and rejects the idea when I don’t like the natures.

I think there is a consistent theoretical reason for the difference on this point. It is true that of the different historical forms of human nature, such as those of feudalism, capitalism, and socialism/communism, Marx evinces a preference for the last. He often talks as if it is better that this nature should be realized and even, at times, that it is in some sense more truly human nature. What underlies this preference is not that this human nature is unique to human beings or that it differs most from the nature of other species. There is no particular reason why a group or a person should develop what is unique or special to it. Rather, Marx’s preference has to do with freedom conceived as the power to act on

one’s own beliefs and desires. In Marx’s theory, consciousness, and much of what is taken to be human nature, is formed by the social system in which people live. This is not to say that it is formed in every detail or that human beings are mere passive products of their society. It is to say that the broad outlines, the limits, are set by the mode of production and one’s place in it. Until the institution of socialism/communism, the mode of production is not under the control of the people who live under it; social relations are exploitative and oppressive. Under socialism/communism, social relations are not exploitative because the mode of production is under conscious collective control. This means that the social determinants of human nature are under human control. Consequently there is a basis for saying that the needs, wants, and capacities that constitute the human nature of socialism and communism are acquired more freely than are those that constitute the human nature of other epochs.

There is another reason—also having to do with freedom—why Marx had a preference for the human nature of socialism and communism. As we have seen, of all the different features of a species, Marx emphasized the characteristic form of life activity as key to the nature of that species. Free, conscious activity is a transhistorical capacity of human beings that is unique to them, but it is only fully developed and realized in socialism and communism. Only when social need is the basis of production and production is under conscious collective control will there be a significant reduction of necessary labor time, beyond which, Marx says, “begins that development of human energy which is a need in itself, the true realm of freedom.” He refers to this sort of labor which is only possible for most people under socialism and communism as “self-realization, objec-
tification of the subject, hence real freedom.”

Thus the human nature of socialism and communism can be said to be more free than that of previous societies in two senses: first, a key aspect of this human nature is the expression of freedom, and second, the determinants of many other aspects of human nature are under people’s conscious, collective control for the first time. For this reason and because it is the most developed form of what is peculiar to human beings, Marx sometimes referred to it as the most truly human nature. A higher value is put on a society in which human nature takes this form because freedom is a basic value.

The women’s nature discussed in this paper is disanalogous to human nature in many respects. Most important is the fact that, while there will

27. Although this way of thinking about it is quite understandable, it should not be taken as negating the more relativistic analysis given earlier in the paper. See my “Free Will and a Marxist Concept of Natural Wants” (Philosophical Forum 6 [1975]: 423–45) for a fuller discussion of some of these issues, though with a more universalistic interpretation of Marx’s theory of human nature.
always be a distinctive human nature, even in socialism/communism, it
seems unlikely that there will always be a distinct women's nature. Except
as a remnant of the past, there seems little reason to think that there
would still be a women's nature in socialism/communism, either the present
one or one specific to that society. The biological differences between
men and women would remain, but this does not constitute a difference
in nature for reasons discussed earlier. Moreover, the biological differences
do not by themselves determine the present psychological differences
between men and women. Rather, it is the sexual/social division of labor
and the resulting sexually differentiated social relations and socialization
that explain the differences. In Marx's theory this is determined not by
biology but primarily by oppressive social, economic, and historical con-
ditions which are not present in socialism/communism. Socialism/com-
munism for Marx is a society of self-governing producers, the self-eman-
cipation of the working class. Since this can come into being and survive
only with the full participation of both sexes, a struggle for women's
liberation is integral to the struggle for socialism. Furthermore, in a
socialist society in Marx's sense there is no economic basis for women's
oppression as there is in capitalism. While there might be some lingering
material and psychological basis in the advantages to men, the nature
both of a successful struggle for socialism and of a genuinely socialist
society would substantially reduce the strength, efficacy, and longevity
of such tendencies.

Now it is not impossible that the biological differences between men
and women would still produce psychological differences under socialism/
communism. Free, conscious activity will not take the same concrete form
for everyone, and it is possible that these forms will differ along sexual
lines. However, since there does not appear to be a direct biological-
psychological link now, why should there be then? One could say that
there would always have to be some differences in men's and women's
experience of themselves as physical beings, but exactly what this means
or how one would determine it is somewhat obscure. In any case, unless
they were expressed in social practices and institutions, such differences,
if they existed, would not have the kind of importance that would warrant
speaking of them as distinct men's and women's natures. The sexual and
reproductive choices women make would not have the kind of profound
social consequences for women as opposed to men that they do now. So
women's needs and interests, in this central and currently sex-differentiated
realm, would differ very little from men's.

As we saw, the reason Marx gave a preference to the human nature
of socialism and communism is that it is more freely acquired than previous
forms of human nature, and freedom is a key constituent of human
nature. Neither of these considerations applies to the present (and past)
sex-related natures. Freedom is not a constituent of (present and past)
sex-related natures, and there is no basis for saying that they were freely
acquired. There is little reason to think that what is truly unique to
women, bearing children, is what they would freely choose to do more than anything else. The biological differences are the basis, along with economic, social, and historical conditions, for the sexual/social division of labor and the resulting social relations—none of which are under their control. Thus the psychological sex differences that result and that constitute sex-differentiated natures are not under their control. Furthermore, ignoring the legal restrictions that exist or that have been lifted only recently, women's traditional social role and the nature associated with it involves less freedom than men's. Being a wife and mother is supposed to be women's primary aim and self-definition, and the traits desirable for women are those that make them better able to fulfill this role—being attractive to men and able to satisfy a family's needs. Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether this life is inherently less challenging and empowering than most men's lives (hence less free in Marx's sense), the point is that this is only one choice. In developed countries, at least, men have many more choices. And though, obviously, as many men are fathers as women are mothers, men are first and foremost doctors, lawyers, tailors, and sailors. Unless this is what women would be inclined to do anyway, this implies that there are greater social pressures on women than on men. When women do take on other jobs, they are still constrained by the traditional values and expectations. Standing in the way of women's wholehearted pursuit of other options are not only the objective constraints of sex discrimination and family responsibilities but, in addition, their own conflicting feelings of obligation, conflicting desires, and even habits (for example, spending a lot of time on their personal appearance). Women's lives are less free than men's are both because they are dependent on men and because they have children dependent on them. Traditional sexual values constrain women more than they do men. And women, being as a rule more passive and oriented to other people's wishes than men are, are less able to act to realize their own desires. In all these ways the present women's nature lacks the freedom involved in the human nature of socialism/communism as envisioned by Marx.

But any women's nature or indeed any sex-differentiated nature would lack this freedom. Indeed there is a contradiction in the very idea of a society in which the human nature distinctive of socialism/communism and this distinctive women's nature are both fully realized. Women (and men) are human beings. They could not simultaneously realize a limited nature determined by limiting social conditions and a nature whose essence is freedom. By definition, any sex-differentiated nature would be more limited than one not so differentiated. And while there is nothing that absolutely precludes sex-differentiated natures from being freely acquired, there seem very good empirical grounds for rejecting the idea that they could be.