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2018

Fortunati, L. (2018). Gender and Feminism. In J. Diamanti, A. Pendakis & I. Szeman (Eds.), *The Bloomsbury Companion to Marx* (pp.549-555). London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Gender and Feminism

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Feminism has been the most relevant political force in twentieth-century political and social movements, thoughts and theories. Its resurgence in the last century has represented a challenge and a potential enrichment of Marxist movements and parties. Feminism and Marxism have fertilized each other by becoming reciprocally beneficial. Although feminism can take many different forms, its common thesis is that the relationship between men and women needs to be radically changed because it is based on inequality, oppression and exploitation. However, the identification of the causes that have determined women's conditions of life over time and the strategies for addressing them are the source of many different perspectives among feminists.

The term feminism was coined by Charles Fourier (1772–1817), the utopian socialist for whom the degree of women's emancipation was the measure of the civilization of a society as a whole. In the twentieth century, the first phase of the feminist movement was the suffragette movement, which sought to extend women's civic rights, including the right to vote. However, the relationship between the socialist movement and the feminist movement was not an easy one. Apparently, there was a convergence in most countries between the aspiration of utopian socialists to create a world of equality, social justice and liberation of workers from exploitation and, on the other, the aspiration of early feminists (Taylor 1983) to create such a world for women as well. In reality, women's objective of "equal pay for equal work" was often not included in the program of male trade-unionists, especially in Germany and Russia.

The second phase of the feminist movement was the women's liberation movement of the 1970s, which developed the idea of sisterhood, as specific form of solidarity among women, based on the theory that the unity of women is rooted on having some common interests to defend. In this decade, the encounter between feminism and Marxism produced a specific political movement, which spread all around the world: namely, Marxist feminism (see James 1953; Dalla Costa and James 1972; Fortunati 1981; Dalla Costa 2008; Federici and Fortunati 1984).

The following decade (the 1980s) was, on the one hand, the period in which women's studies or gender studies emerged as a major academic discipline. The birth of gender studies brought about a kind of institutionalization to feminism but, at the same time, made feminism a recognized part of the management of academic knowledge production and sharing. On the other hand, the 1980s was the period in which a true, undeclared war against feminism was fought largely in the media. The counterattack against the feminist moment claimed that feminists had gone too far with their political program and had created a lot of discontent among women.

However, the debate opened in the 1970s continued to be nurtured and developed while a younger generation of women began to present themselves as potent social subjects, capable of expressing a relevant political agency. Whereas recognizing themselves as victims of social systems was a potent point of departure for women struggling in the 1970s and 1980s, in the 1990s this metaphor became a dissonant image that ended up disempowering young women. The new generation of feminists needed to apply for accreditation and public recognition as a political subject who, thanks to the social power that had been gained by women through the struggles of the previous decade, had earned considerable political importance.

A significant theme, which was an outcome of Women's Liberation and Feminism movements and has conveyed many theoretical efforts by feminists, is that of gender. The term gender began to be used in English as distinct from sex in the 1970s. It was defined in terms of socially constructed notions of femininity and masculinity, in contrast to sex defined as biological differences. The purpose of this distinction was to argue that what in Western culture was considered "biological" could perhaps be the result of beliefs, cultural conventions, education, social pressures and prejudice. The main feminist motivation for making this distinction was to contest biological determinism or the idea that biology, as a careful guardian of nature, was an inevitable destiny, since this was often invoked as justification for women's oppression. Ann Oakley (1972) proposed the distinction between sex, considered a biological term, and gender, considered a social and psychological term. She added the adjective social, because, although people are male or female at the biological level, they are pressured by culture to be and become masculine or feminine through processes of socialization (1974, 1996).

In conclusion, sex was considered a fixed or immutable element, whereas gender was conceived as changeable, historically determined and influenced by political and social factors (Rubin 1975). Over time, this idea turned out to be not completely true in the sense that sex is also subject to changes over history determined by the force of culture, although not as fast and impressive as those of gender (Fausto-Sterling 1993, 2005). Judith Butler (1999) expressed concerns about the difficulty to distinguish biological sex from social gender, although Alison Stone (2007) argued that recognizing both sex and gender as being socially constructed does not have sex identical to gender. In the same vein, Linda Nicholson (1994) wrote that society, starting from sexed bodies, fixes the amount of femininity and masculinity of humans as being either male or female. However, as Mari Mikkola (2016: 4) argued, there is no consensus about which social practices construct gender, what social construction is and what it means to have a certain degree of femininity or masculinity. This lack of consensus signals the fact that this analysis is far from precise. Society is used in generic terms, without specifying "the who" in society, except for a generic male- masculine ruling power.

According to Katherine Millet (1971), the problem of gender is socialization, whereby by unlearning social roles and social practices women should be able to create more equal societies. Gender as social construction is based on a process of socialization (Millet 1971) in which a female becomes a woman by acquiring feminine traits and learning feminine behavior. The mechanism of construction of masculinity and femininity concerns social learning, and Sue Sharpe (1976) showed how the different socialization of boys and girls at home and at school influences the process of how girls become women. Two important contributions to the gender debate were introduced by Sue Lees (1993) and Butler (1999). Lees argued that the construction of masculinity and femininity is based on the relations of power that shape domestic roles to the disadvantage of girls and women. Butler considered the ascription of gender as the result of a process of "girling" and "boying" beginning before birth and continuously reinforced by the use of performativity.

From many feminist analyses, it seems first that socialization, education (Kimmel 2000), social learning (Renzetti and Curran 1992), social roles and practices are the outcome of behavior that shapes women's subordination with an unspecified power as one possible reason. There are of course some relevant exceptions: one of these is the interesting attempt made by Nancy Chodorow (1978, 1995) to find concrete reasons for the social practices that produce stereotyped men and women. She argued that

starting from birth men and women develop different personalities in early infancy as responses to the fact that mothers tend to identify more with daughters than with sons. She also proposes a solution: both fathers and mothers should be equally involved in parenting. Another thesis (although less fully elaborated) is advanced by Catherine MacKinnon (1989), for whom the notion of gender should be rooted in a theory of sexuality, which identifies the power relation between men and women as a crucial factor from which the sexual dominance of masculinity and the sexual submissiveness of femininity derives.

Second, it is not clear what should be appropriate for each gender. These approaches show how current socialization, social learning, social roles and social practices produce stereotyped and "wrong" women (and men). However, they fail to indicate what good socialization, social learning, social roles and social practices should be. In the same way, they do not indicate what a "non- stereotypical" woman and a man should be.

The intellectual and scientific starting point of the gender debate was Simone de Beauvoir (1949) who anticipated many arguments that would later be found in the sex-gender debate when she wrote "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman, " adding that femininity is not an eternal essence but is the product of contingent forces. Then, in 1953, Selma James wrote the essay "A Woman's Place, " in which she depicted the daily conditions of women in post-w ar Los Angeles. In this essay, for the first time, domestic labor emerged as the main reason for women's weakness and the first ring of the chain in the exploitation of women. Robert Stoller (1968) shed new light on the sex/gender question with his research on the psychological effects of having lived with an erroneous gender assignment at birth. In the mid–1980s, gender began to be replaced by "sexual difference," a less dualistic and broader expression.

In this debate on gender, one of the most important themes has been the definition of women as a social group, collective or category. Here the debate has become thorny. Instead of stimulating a reflection on women's social stratification, the recognition of differences of nationality, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation and social position has ended up sowing doubts about whether it was possible to build a truly inclusive feminist movement. Very often in these analyses and their given theoretical approaches, women are seen as passive social subjects, completely devoid of any agency.

After its initial articulation, the debate about gender has further developed a range of analytics and arguments: gendered social series (Young 1997), resemblance nominalism (Stoljar 1995), gender realism and particularity (Spelman 1988), normativity (Butler 1999), gender uniessentialism (Witt 2011), and gender as positionality (Alcoff 2006). It is not surprising that this on- going theoretical development has turned on itself: when the feminist movement has begun to ebb, the political analysis and theory have of course suffered.

Feminism was born revealing and exposing gender as a politically, economically and sociologically substantive variable. To overcome centuries of division among women, in the first period it was necessary to forge the unity of women—the unity of women as women. This step had the purpose of avoiding the potential inhibition of women by the presence of men in meetings and assemblies. For this reason, there was in feminism a kind of interdiction to men, even if all women were accepted without any distinction related to the sex/gender question. Women activists were simply read as political subjects, available to struggle. This organizational foresight to close ranks within the world of women has proven to be a very effective political strategy and

allowed women to talk in political meetings, a practice to which they were not accustomed. Men who were available to support women's struggles were considered sympathizers but were only greeted as such at public demonstrations.

The first phase of feminism saw women such as workers, teachers and intellectuals, but also women who belonged to the bourgeoisie, struggle together. Distinguishing low class women from middle- upper class women then was out of place, because at this early stage, women struggled to change their living conditions everywhere in society, especially on issues that were transversal to the various classes: the right to abortion, to have or not to have children (and eventually, the number of children to have), to obtain recognition of the absolute mastery of their body, and finally, the right to social and economic recognition for the work that all women did, including domestic and care work.

But after this first step, women needed to organize themselves with women not only to change their living conditions but also to change the model of society in order to impose a redistribution of wealth. To oppression and subordination, they began to add the word exploitation. The feminist movement grew at this point, stretching to include numerous different and distinct constituencies. One of these souls was represented by Marxist Feminists. For them, it was no longer enough to be a woman in order to be a feminist. Belonging to the female gender was perceived as a necessary but not sufficient condition to be a feminist and to act as a feminist. The progress that women as such were achieving in various fields (from journalism to research and academic work) by increasing their presence and visibility did not imply an automatic improvement in the "quality" of their work. Even if, for example, the world of academia had become somewhat more open to women over time, it had not become any less class- driven. The same holds true for other forms of work in which women began to have more opportunities to participate.

Although in his early works Marx shared the belief that the quality of the man-woman relationship is the measure of the degree of civilization achieved by that society, neither Capital nor the Grundrisse pose the problem of gender. There are many passages 553

that describe the condition of women as workers; however, women's problems are seen as problems of the working class. In the transition from the description of women's problems to the elaborations of their analytical and political frame, women remained in the background. Their specific liberation was subordinated to that of the proletariat. The working class was seen as theoretically indistinguishable with respect to gender. In practice, the working class was predominately constituted by men. It is not surprising that women thus had to develop a specific story of struggle: the suffragette movement. Nevertheless, Marxism has had a large role to play with respect to gender, both negative and positive.

Marxism has had a *negative* role because it has created in the history of workers' struggles a sense of alienation and anomie in women. In fact, women were understood by orthodox Marxists as unproductive and therefore marginal with respect to class struggle. Their presence was appreciated only with respect to the aid and solidarity that women could give to the real protagonists of the working class: the male workers. Furthermore, since Marx had described religion as the opium of people, another contradiction opened up for women, who often had greater attachment to religion, as they had historically used it to hold off male power. Although the church was an institution heavily reliant on misogynistic and reactionary positions against women, women used religion and the religious rituals that governed everyday life to defend

themselves from social practices and institutions that were even more disadvantageous for them. Male workers were much more likely than women to take up atheism, because they had more to gain, such as, for example, sexual freedom, and freedom from any marital bond and responsibility.

Marxism has also had a *positive* role, since it has provided the basis for some aspects of feminism to avoid, from the beginning, the error of essentialism. This had been a mistake of feminism in general, which was in part inevitable because in its first stage, women had to move all together. The unconventional use of Marxian categories allowed Marxist feminists to root their analysis of women's condition of life in a solid critique of political economy. Marx had unwittingly procured the tools that—if used from a feminist perspective—would have enabled women to demonstrate how the positions of orthodox Marxists were wrong. In fact, a new analysis soon emerged showing that, on the contrary, domestic work and prostitution were productive and that women were fully part of the revolutionary militancy. With this analysis, Marxist feminists put an end to the sense of alienation and anomie in women's politics, finally opening up the real possibility for women to have a truly autonomous and proactive political agency.

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