

Interrogating Inequality

Essays on Class Analysis, Socialism and Marxism

ERIK OLIN WRIGHT


VERSO
London · New York

Explanation and Emancipation in Marxism and Feminism

Both Marxism and feminism are emancipatory theoretical traditions in that they envision the possibility of eliminating from social life certain forms of oppression.¹ The two traditions differ, however, in the extent to which theorists within each take for granted the *viability* of their core emancipatory projects: Marxists have often treated the viability of communism – a society without class oppression – as problematic; feminists rarely question the viability of a society without male domination. Of course, feminists frequently engage the problem of the social, political, and cultural obstacles to eliminating male domination, and different feminists have different visions of what life in a world without male oppression would be like. But what is not generally discussed is the viability of a society within which male domination has been eliminated. For reasons which we will explore below, there is much skepticism among people who share the radical egalitarian *values* of Marxists that a classless society with advanced technologies is viable; there seems to be much less skepticism among people with feminist values that a society without male domination is viable. Feminists generally take it for granted that social life does not *require* male domination; Marxists are forced to defend the claim that social life under conditions of developed technology does not need some form or other of class domination.

The central objective of this chapter is to explore this contrast between these two traditions of emancipatory social theory. My motivation for doing so comes primarily from the Marxist side of the comparison. At the core of the project of reconstructing Marxism as a social

1. I am using the term “emancipation” as the most general way of framing the normative objectives of radicals. A variety of more specific values can be subsumed under this general expression: self-realization, happiness, meaningfulness, sexual fulfillment, material welfare, etc. “Oppression,” then, is a situation in which a group is unjustly deprived of one or more of these values; emancipation is the elimination of the relevant form of oppression.

theory is the problem of the relationship between its emancipatory vision and its explanatory structure. My hope is that a comparison with the feminist theoretical tradition will help to give greater precision to our understanding of the dilemmas which Marxism faces today. The point of the comparison of Marxism and feminism in this chapter, therefore, is not to indict feminists for their relative silence on the problem of the viability of feminism's emancipatory project, nor to show that Marxists are somehow more sophisticated because they worry about these issues. Rather, the point is to use the contrast between the theoretical preoccupations of these two traditions as a way of revealing certain salient properties of the theoretical terrain on which they work.

Before we approach these issues, however, we need to clarify several key concepts we will be using throughout the analysis: Marxism, feminism, oppression, and emancipatory viability.

Marxism and Feminism as Emancipatory Theories

It is far from easy to produce compact, non-controversial definitions of "Marxism" and "feminism." The boundaries of each are contested, both by intellectuals committed to these traditions and by their critics. For the purposes of this chapter, I do not think that it is necessary to provide complete definitions of either; it will be sufficient to work with a fairly stylized description of their underlying theoretical structures. I will, accordingly, treat Marxism and feminism as emancipatory traditions of social theory built around the critical analysis of particular forms of oppression – class oppression and gender oppression respectively – rather than as well-bounded, integrated explanatory theories.² They are *emancipatory* theories in that both theoretical traditions believe that the forms of oppression on which they focus should be and can be eliminated; both see the active struggle of the oppressed groups at the core of their theory as an essential part of the process through which such oppression is transformed; and intellectuals working within both tradi-

2. It may be controversial to some people to characterize feminism as an emancipatory tradition directed against *gender* oppression rather than simply against the oppression of *women*. Certainly, until recently feminists did not explicitly embed their understanding of the oppression of women in a theory of gender relations, and thus earlier feminists generally characterized their struggles as strictly against the oppression of women as such. Many contemporary feminists, however, understand the ramifications of male domination within gender relations more broadly than simply as an issue of men dominating and oppressing women. Male homosexuals, for example, are also generally viewed as oppressed under existing gender relations, and while it is a more complex (and contentious) argument, I think that many heterosexual men can also be viewed as oppressed within gender relations. There is no need to work through these issues in the present context.

tions believe that the central reason for bothering to do social theory and research is to contribute in some way to the realization of their respective emancipatory projects. Where they differ, in these terms, is in the kind of social oppression which anchors their emancipatory and theoretical projects.

In making the distinction between Marxisms and feminisms in terms of their pivotal concern with different forms of oppression, I am making no assumptions about the autonomy, one from the other, of these two forms of oppression in the world. Clearly, in actual societies there are systematic, reciprocal effects between gender relations and class relations in all sorts of ways. Understanding such reciprocal effects between class and gender is at the heart of much socialist feminism, whether in the form of "dual systems theory" or more unitary theories of class and gender.³ Nevertheless, unless one is prepared to abandon the separate categories of "class" and "gender" altogether and replace them with a new amalgamated category, "clender," I believe that it is important to distinguish class and gender analytically as two dimensions of social relations which interact rather than treat class/gender as a unitary category. Once such a distinction is made, then the question of the feasibility of eliminating each of these aspects of social oppression can be posed. The *answer* may be that one cannot be eliminated without the other, as some socialist feminists have stressed, but that should be a discovery rather than a premiss of the categories themselves.

Defining Marxisms as emancipatory theories for the elimination of class oppression and feminisms as emancipatory theories for the elimination of gender oppression leaves open precisely what is packed into the concept of "oppression" within each tradition. Obviously, depending precisely on how oppression is defined, the project of eliminating oppression can become a utopian fantasy or a practical political program. If, for example, we define oppression in typical liberal terms as a situation in which different categories of people have different *formal rights*, then it would be a relatively non-contentious matter to argue that class and

3. In the terms of the present discussion, socialist feminism can be thought of as a hybrid of the two emancipatory traditions we are examining. Throughout this discussion I will not make a distinction between "socialist feminism" and "Marxist feminism," since both of these attempt to take seriously the problem of the interconnection between class and gender. The classical statement of "dual systems theory" is Heidi Hartmann's essay, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism," in Lydia Sargent, ed., *Women and Revolution*, Boston 1981, pp. 1–41. A critique of dual systems theory which attempts to frame a more unitary theory of class and gender is Iris Young, "Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: a critique of dual systems theory," in Sargent, pp. 43–70. For a general discussion of varieties of feminism which discusses the difference between socialist feminism and Marxist feminism, see Alison Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg Struhl, eds., *Feminist Frameworks*, New York 1984, and Alison Jaggar, *Feminism and Human Nature*, Totowa 1983.

gender oppression can be eliminated. Once workers have the franchise and full rights to organize collectively, and once ascriptive barriers to equal opportunity have been eliminated, class oppression will have disappeared. Once women are accorded full citizenship and reproductive rights, and anti-discrimination procedures are firmly in place, gender oppression will be eliminated.⁴ On the other hand, if one takes a maximalist view of what it would mean to eliminate oppressions, then eliminating particular forms of oppression may indeed seem utopian. In the Marxist tradition, for example, there are those who have claimed that class oppression will exist so long as there is any division of labor whatsoever between mental and manual labor, between conception and execution. It is hard to imagine how a technologically advanced society could actually function under such principles.

For the purpose of the analysis of this chapter, I will adopt a conception of eliminating oppression that is more radical than the liberal conception but less extravagant than a maximalist understanding. Oppression will be defined as a situation in which the relevant categories of social actors (people within the social relations of production and within gender relations) systematically differ in terms of social power and material welfare.⁵ The emancipatory project of eliminating oppression then means the equalization of power and welfare across the relevant social categories.⁶ In the rhetoric of the Marxist tradition, this corresponds to the elimination of alienation and exploitation – eliminating power differentials linked to the social relations of production and inequalities in income that go beyond differences in needs. This amounts to the elimination of classes. The emancipatory future envisioned in traditional Marxism – communism – is a classless society. In the case of gender oppression this definition of emancipation implies eliminating power and welfare differentials between men and women. This goes far beyond equal rights, since it implies instituting a wide range of social changes (e.g. public provision of childcare, equality of labor market

4. For a discussion of liberal feminism, see Jaggar, chapters 3 and 7.

5. The problem of defining oppression is aggravated in the present context, since we are comparing the emancipatory projects of eliminating two different kinds of oppression: class and gender. In order to make sense of the comparison we need to discuss these two oppressions in analytically comparable terms. It would make no sense, for example, to compare a liberal conception of gender oppression (eliminating gender inequalities of rights) with a more radical conception of class oppression (eliminating classes altogether).

6. The idea of equality of "welfare" is complicated, given that people differ so greatly in their non-material endowments and needs. The normative ideal of equality of welfare therefore usually takes the more modest practical form of equality of income (or access to external resources), modified by some provisions for inequalities of income required to deal with various kinds of disabilities (i.e. "to each according to need"). For the present purposes of comparing Marxism and feminism as emancipatory and explanatory theories, we can bracket these difficult philosophical problems.

position, changes in work organization to eliminate gender differences in the burden of childrearing, etc.) necessary to give men and women equal real power.

Many feminists, of course, hold much more complex visions of gender emancipation than simply equality of power and welfare. Some believe in the possibility of dismantling gender relations altogether; others see emancipation as centered on making certain purported "female differences" the central organizing principles of social life (e.g. nurturing); and still others place issues of sexuality, especially the problem of homophobia, at the center of the emancipatory project. These are all interesting and important issues, and a fully elaborated discussion of the varieties of feminist emancipatory ideals would have to explore the implications of these alternatives. Nevertheless, all of these different feminisms share the thin notion of emancipation as the elimination of gender inequality of power and welfare, and thus for the purposes of our comparison with Marxism I will rely on this understanding of emancipatory objectives.

With this working definition of oppression, the question of the viability of an emancipatory project can be restated as follows: could a society within which power and welfare were not differentiated by class and/or gender be sustainable? Or would such a society necessarily contain self-destructive contradictions which will tend to unravel the emancipatory objectives or make them simply unattainable in the first place? The goal of this chapter, then, is to explore the relationship between the kind of explanatory theories characteristic of the Marxist and feminist traditions and the nature of these emancipatory projects. Again, this is a stylized and limited characterization of the emancipatory vision of Marxism and feminism. There are many emancipatory issues within each theoretical tradition that are not directly encompassed within this definition: the problem of autonomy and self-realization in Marxism; questions of sexuality, identity and difference in feminisms. Nevertheless, equality of power and welfare are sufficiently central to the emancipatory agenda of all Marxisms and feminisms that comparing the two traditions in these terms will help to clarify certain important differences in the explanatory tasks which they confront.

The Silence on the "Viability" of Emancipatory Objectives in Feminism

In order to establish the credibility of the project of gender emancipation, feminist intellectuals have focused primarily on three tasks. First, much writing has been devoted to demonstrating that gender relations can properly be described as relation of domination and oppression. A

great deal of feminist empirical work is devoted to providing evidence that women are systematically harmed in many ways by the gender relations within which they live, and thus that those relations can be described as oppressive. Second, feminists have been concerned to establish that these relations are not unalterably given by biology, but are socially (or, some theorists would prefer, culturally) constructed. Clearly, the indictment of gender relations as oppressive would be vitiated if the disadvantages women suffer were completely determined by biology. Much attention has therefore been devoted to demonstrating the great variability in the forms of oppression of women across time and place in order to give credibility to the claim that such oppression is socially generated. Third, modern feminists have analyzed the various social, economic, and cultural processes in contemporary societies which undermine and/or reproduce existing forms of gender oppression and thus create the context for transformative struggles, especially through the agency of women. Discussions of these three clusters of issues have been at the heart of the development of modern feminism.

Very little attention has been directly given, however, to the problem of the practical viability of a society within which gender oppression has been eliminated. As already noted, much effort has been devoted to demonstrating that gender relations are socially constructed, but this is not equivalent to demonstrating that gender emancipation is viable. Indeed, it is possible that male domination *could* be biologically based *and* that male domination can be eliminated. Biologically, human beings are omnivores but this does not prevent people from adopting a strictly vegetarian diet. Biologically, human beings have sexual drives, but this does not prevent the social creation of celibate religious orders. Whatever one's judgment is on the question of the biological roots of gender relations, the problem of demonstrating the eliminability of male domination is thus not equivalent to demonstrating that male domination is socially constructed.

Of course, much discussion has gone into the analysis of the obstacles to actually creating such a society. It is important, however, not to confuse a claim that the obstacles to *achieving* an emancipatory alternative are enormous, perhaps even insurmountable under contemporary conditions, with the claim that the alternative itself is not *viable*.⁷ Feminists differ considerably in the extent to which they believe that such

7. Consider the contrast between the achievability and viability for socialism. It could be the case (a) that counterfactually, if capitalism were destroyed and workers democratically controlled the means of production, the economy would run efficiently and equitably, and thus socialism would be deemed viable, and also (b) that capitalists would rather destroy the world through a nuclear suicide than give up power. Under these conditions socialism is viable, but unattainable.

obstacles are either primarily located in cultural and sexual practices that shape the formation of deeply rooted gender subjectivities, or mainly located in economic and political institutions of power and privilege. Feminists also disagree over whether gender domination can be gradually eroded through an incremental process of reform or whether radical ruptures in the system of male domination are needed.⁸ But the viability of the emancipatory objective itself is not subjected to systematic, critical scrutiny.⁹ Feminists do not ask the question, "are there contradictions within egalitarian gender relations which might render a society without male domination non-reproducible?" It is as if demonstrating that *existing* gender relations are oppressive and socially constructed is equivalent to showing that a society within which male domination has been eliminated would be viable.

This silence on the part of feminists occurs in an ideological context in which there is relatively little skepticism among people who hold radical egalitarian values about the viability of eliminating male domination. Even among leftist radicals who are not particularly sympathetic to feminism as a tradition of theory, there is relatively little skepticism in the contemporary period about the practical viability of a society without male domination. To be sure, there is often a lot of skepticism by non-feminist leftists about the viability of distinctively feminist *politics*, since many Marxists believe that the liberation of women can only succeed if subordinated to the allegedly "more fundamental" task of transforming class relations. And there is certainly skepticism about some radical feminist claims concerning the range of ramifications of eliminating gender oppression (for example, the claim that bureaucratic hierarchy is a distinctively male form of administrative organization, and thus that eliminating male domination would imply – and require – an elimination of all hierarchy). But, at least in the contemporary period, relatively little skepticism is directly expressed at the possibility of eventually eliminating differences in welfare and power based on gender.

8. For a discussion of the history of feminist thought which touches on the problem of incremental reform vs. ruptural breaks in male domination, see Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought*, Boston 1983.

9. The one context in which the issue of the viability of gender emancipation is indirectly posed is in socialist feminist discussions about whether or not *capitalist* society is viable without gender oppression. It is often argued that capitalism *needs* male domination for various reasons, and that thus this particular form of society is not reproducible without gender oppression. Such arguments, however, all concern the viability of *capitalism* without male domination; there is no discussion of whether or not a post-capitalist society without male domination is viable.

The Viability of Classlessness

The contrast between the relative silence on the problem of the viability of gender emancipation and the extensive discussions of the viability of communism (understood as a full classless society), and even of socialism (understood as a society in which the working class democratically controls the means of production and class divisions are declining) is striking. Many radical intellectuals on the left, including Marxists committed to radically egalitarian values, doubt that class inequalities could ever be completely eliminated. A variety of familiar arguments have been advanced against the viability of classlessness. First, it is often argued that in order for a complex economy to maintain even minimal efficiency, significant material incentives (and sanctions) are needed, particularly for people occupying positions of great responsibility requiring high levels of skill. While logically it might not be the case that such incentive-inequalities would have to threaten classlessness, there would be strong tendencies for the recipients of such incentives to use the leverage of their positions to extort economic premiums from the larger community.¹⁰ While perhaps less onerous than the inequalities based on property ownership in capitalism, such extortion in a "socialist" society would constitute exploitation rooted in command over productive resources (skills and responsible jobs in this instance) and would thus challenge the emancipatory project of classlessness.¹¹

Second, skepticism is often expressed about the possibility of genuinely democratic control over the means of production. While it might be possible in quite small firms for ordinary workers to play an active role in organizational decision-making, many people argue that in large firms such involvement would necessarily be superficial at best. Perhaps workers could have a say in choosing managers, but the actual running of large, complex corporations – including the practical exercise of much

10. An "incentive" is an amount of extra income necessary to compensate a person for the extra effort involved in acquiring skills or performing arduous and stressful work (which, for example, might accompany high levels of responsibility). An "extortion," on the other hand, is an increment of income above and beyond what is necessary to compensate a person for this extra effort. Strictly speaking, incentive payments are needed in order to maintain rough equality in overall welfare across persons (i.e. people need to be compensated for the extra "disutility of labor"), whereas extortion generates inequality in real welfare. In these terms, "extortion" is equivalent to "exploitation." For a discussion of these conceptual issues, see Erik Olin Wright, *The Debate on Classes*, London 1989.

11. The characterization of the incomes of people who command high levels of skill or responsibility as "exploitation" is derived from the work of John Roemer. See especially Roemer, "New Directions in the Marxian Theory of Class and Exploitation," *Politics & Society*, vol. 11, no. 3, and *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*, Cambridge, Mass. 1982.

operational power – would have to be under the control of managers and executives. This, again, would tend to generate class inequalities.

Finally, particularly in the aftermath of the stagnation and collapse of the state socialist economies, many leftist intellectuals argue that because of the massive information problems in a complex industrial society, centralized planning of the details of production is not possible. Given that centralized allocation of capital is not possible, then some kind of market mechanism for the allocation of capital goods is needed to coordinate production. But once markets in investments (rather than simply in consumer goods) are allowed to function in even limited ways, they will tend to generate class inequalities. While there could be considerable democratic social control over the parameters of the system of production, once markets are allowed to play a significant role in allocating capital, something very much like capitalism would tend to re-emerge. This would be the case even if firms took the form of workers' cooperatives, since under conditions of market competition such cooperatives would behave pretty much like capitalist firms.

A range of plausible arguments can be used to defend the emancipatory project of a classless society against these attacks. Against the first claim it can be argued that gradually, over time, the balance between extortion and incentive could shift in favor of incentives, particularly as the economic security of people increases and high-quality public goods replace important elements of private consumption. Against the second claim it can be argued that through education, work teams, shorter working weeks, and other changes, meaningful democratic participation becomes much more possible even within large organizations, and thus the effective power differentials associated with hierarchy might decline over time. Finally, against the third claim it could be argued that while market mechanisms might of necessity play an important information role in allocating capital, the inequalitarian consequences of such allocations can be systematically neutralized by an activist, socialist state. Taxation, redistribution, and regulation could be designed in such a way as to prevent the relatively decentralized, cooperatively managed firms from degenerating into capitalist enterprises.

My point here is thus *not* that the arguments against the possibility of eliminating class oppression are convincing. Rather, the point is that these doubts are raised by people on the left, people sympathetic to the emancipatory egalitarian values themselves. At this time in history, parallel arguments are not generally made by egalitarians with respect to gender oppression. Of course, there many be *anti*-egalitarians of various sorts for whom a society without male domination would be seen as non-viable. Certainly many right-wing religious fundamentalists would see such a society as destroying the basic fabric of social life, leading to chaos

and disintegration. Within the community of people sharing egalitarian emancipatory values, however, there is little skepticism about the viability of a radical emancipatory project for the elimination of gender domination and inequality, while there is considerable skepticism about the elimination of class oppression.

One hundred years ago the situation was quite different. Radical class theorists took it as obvious that class inequality and domination were becoming increasingly unnecessary and could be superseded in a post-capitalist society. Capitalist development was seen as creating such high levels of concentration and centralization of production, with such high levels of surplus, that workers would be able to transform the solidarities and interdependencies they experienced within production into an egalitarian reorganization of the society as a whole. All they needed to accomplish this was power. Feminists in the last century, on the other hand, rarely envisioned a society without a quite substantial gender division of labor and even gender inequality. While recognizing that the potentials of women were blocked by the forms of male domination existing in their society, particularly as these were embodied in legal restrictions on the rights of women, the emancipatory project did not generally pose the possibility of a future of radically egalitarian relations between men and women.¹²

At the close of the twentieth century, second-wave feminism envisions a future that ranges from complete equality of rights of men and women to the elimination of all gender inequalities in power and welfare (although not necessarily the elimination of all gender differences). No feminists imagine that male *domination* in even vestigial form is essential for social life. Many Marxists, on the other hand, have come to doubt the feasibility of the most egalitarian forms of their historic emancipatory class project, partially as a result of the failures of authoritarian state socialist systems and partially as a result of theoretical development within Marxism itself.

Why is the viability of the feminist emancipatory alternative to male domination seen as so unproblematic compared to the Marxist emancipatory project? One possibility is that this simply reflects the historical context for the development of the two intellectual traditions. Marxism has not only had one hundred-plus years of sustained debate, but has also borne witness to a massive historical "experiment" in applying certain of its core ideas to the actual design of social institutions. Whether or not one endorses or condemns these experiments as authentic embodiments of Marxist ideals, they have deeply affected the intellectual climate

12. This characterization of nineteenth-century feminism was suggested to me by Linda Gordon (personal communication).

within which the problem of class emancipation can be discussed. Perhaps after a hundred years of development of systematic feminist social theory, and in the aftermath of an equivalent attempt at instituting radical gender equality, there would be similar skepticism about its viability.

While undoubtedly the current skepticism among leftists about classlessness has been significantly shaped by the historical experience of the authoritarian socialist states, I do not think that the silence on the problem of viability within feminism can be attributed mainly to the absence of massive societal experiments in gender emancipation or the relatively recent vintage of systematic feminist theory. Rather, I believe there is a crucial difference in the character of the emancipatory projects themselves which provides a plausible grounding for feminist confidence that gender emancipation is a viable social project. In particular, class and gender differ in terms of the relationship between lived micro-experiences within existing relations and the macro-institutional changes required for emancipation.

Micro- and Macro-Contexts of Emancipatory Projects

In the everyday practices of living in patriarchal societies, in a variety of ways people can experience prefigurative forms of gender equality.¹³ First of all, in the historical experience of contemporary women there has been a steady trajectory of transformation of gender relations in an egalitarian direction. Without suggesting that male domination is on its last legs, or even that new forms of gender inequality have not emerged, the opening up of greater personal opportunities and political possibilities for women is a critical part of the lived experience of women in the twentieth century.¹⁴ Furthermore, in the more recent past there has been

13. To say that a person experiences a "prefigurative form" does not imply that in a male dominated society either men or women can really experience "what it would be like" to live in a gender-egalitarian society. To experience a partial form of X is not the same as experiencing a fully developed form of X for a limited time or in a limited context. The point being made here is that within oppressive gender relations it is possible for people to experience glimpses of more egalitarian relations, glimpses which contribute to the credibility of the alternative.

14. There are feminists who insist that male domination has "simply" been reconstituted in a new and equally oppressive form – from private patriarchy constructed particularly within the family to public patriarchy constructed particularly within the labor market and the state. In this view, the transformations that have occurred in the past fifty years do not represent any real progress towards more egalitarian gender relations. While it is undeniable that new forms of male domination have emerged, reflected in such things as the feminization of poverty, new forms of job segregation, and the double shift of paid and domestic labor, in terms of the overall distribution of welfare and power in capitalist democracies, I believe that the trajectory of gender relations has been in a generally egalitarian direction in recent decades.

added to this experience of a trajectory of social change, the experience of the collective political efficacy of women engaged in transformative politics. The women's movement itself generates a range of experiences of solidarities among women which are prefigurative of a society in which women are not dominated by men. If for no other reason, therefore, a simple extrapolation into the future of trends of the recent past suggests the viability of a world without gender oppression.

But this is not all. Gender oppression itself has a peculiar structure in that even inside the existing relations within which men dominate women there are elements of prefigurative experiences of symmetry and equality. Women have male children whom they nurture; boys have mothers whom they love. And even in the relations of husbands and wives within traditional "patriarchal" relations, alongside practices which are oppressive, reflecting relations of domination, there are elements of reciprocity and companionship which prefigure, even if in a limited way, the potential for egalitarian relations. This is part of the specific complexity of gender domination – the way it packages together in variable degrees and forms domination and equality, oppression and reciprocity.¹⁵ The elimination of gender oppression can thus be partially experienced in micro-contexts in a society within which gender domination remains. The practical plausibility of eliminating gender oppression altogether is therefore experienced, if still in partial and limited ways, within existing societies.

It could be objected that the same is true about the elimination of class domination. After all, in the practical cooperation among workers on the shop floor and in the solidaristic struggles against bosses, workers could be said to experience prefigurative forms of socialist – or even communist – relations. Such solidaristic and cooperative experiences have certainly been important in drawing people to the socialist movement, and they do provide some existential basis for the plausibility of the Marxist emancipatory project. Why, then, aren't such experiences a practical demonstration of the viability of a classless society?

There are two issues that distinguish prefigurative emancipatory gender experiences from prefigurative emancipatory class experiences. First, in the case of gender, the prefigurative symmetrical experiences include experiences that bind people together across gender categories. In the case of class, the prefigurative emancipatory experiences are not between workers and capitalists, but exclusively among workers.

15. The way in which this internal complexity of gender relations, combining oppression and reciprocity, prefigures egalitarian gender relations was emphasized to me by Linda Gordon in a discussion of an earlier draft of this chapter.

Second, and more important for the present context, there is a different relationship between micro-experiences and macro-changes in the case of class and gender: whereas it is relatively easy to extrapolate from the micro-setting of prefigurative non-oppressive gender interactions to an image of a society without gender oppression, it is much more problematic to extrapolate from the micro-settings of class solidarity to a model of society without class domination. The reason for this is that socialist (and communist) production requires active macro-level *coordination*, with macro-level institutional arrangements which generate distinctive macro-level dynamics. The solidarities experienced in the interpersonal practices of class struggle and the micro-settings of the labor process, therefore, do not translate in any simple way into the institutional mechanisms of planning, information flows, allocation of capital, and price setting. There is nothing comparable at the macro-institutional level for gender practices.

This is emphatically *not* to suggest that macro-institutional arrangements are unimportant for gender relations. Gender is not simply a micro-interpersonal phenomenon in contrast to class, which is both a micro- and a macro-social phenomenon. The laws of the state, the structure of labor markets, and the division of labor, to cite several examples, all affect gender practices in significant ways and are systematically shaped by gender relations. And it is also undoubtedly the case that in order to create and reproduce a society without gender domination, state institutions would have to enforce various laws against discrimination and violence structured around gender. There would have to be extensive public provision of childcare services and reorganization of work to eliminate gender differences in the burden of childcare, since childrearing plays such a central role in sustaining gender inequalities. Particularly in a transition period towards a society without gender oppression it would probably be necessary to have quite pervasive forms of state intervention in issues around gender, although much of this intervention could perhaps be of an extremely decentralized sort. All of these interventions imply that gender egalitarianism requires certain kinds of macro-social arrangements.

Nevertheless, even though gender relations are not simply equivalent to micro-practices and experiences (and thus their transformation requires various kinds of macro-structural arrangements), there is still an important difference from the parallel situation of eliminating class oppression. The emancipatory gender interventions of the state are all directed at the micro-settings of gender practices; they would not have to solve any problems of the system-level coordination of different gender practices as such in order for the society to be reproducible. What is the gender equivalent of long-term macro-economic planning of invest-

ments? Or of international flows of commodities? Or of coordination of intermediate goods in a highly interdependent production process? All of these macro-institutional issues potentially call into question the idea of a classless society. There do not seem to be any parallel system-integration dilemmas posed by gender equality. It is for this reason that the extrapolation from particular micro-experiences of eliminating gender oppression to the society as a whole seems so plausible; macro-institutional arrangements may have to intervene systematically at the micro-level, but there are no distinctively *gender* contradictions of the macro-coordination as such.

Now, it *could* in principle be the case, contrary to what I have just argued, that the extrapolation from the micro- to the macro- is illegitimate in the case of emancipatory gender practices, just as it seems to be for class practices. There are two kinds of possibilities worth considering. First, it could be the case that the kinds of state interventions and other institutional arrangements discussed above – work reorganization, child-care, real labor market equality, etc. – could only be possible (for financial and other reasons) under socialist conditions. Capitalism may be incompatible with the institutional conditions for complete gender emancipation.¹⁶ If, then, it turns out that socialism itself is not viable for the reasons adduced earlier, this would imply that an extrapolation from the micro-prefigurative experiences of gender equality to society as a whole would also be illegitimate. This would not, however, be due to any distinctive contradiction inside of the project of gender emancipation as such. Rather, the non-viability of gender emancipation would be due to a macro-failure in the project of class emancipation.

There is a second possibility, however, in which the macro-institutional dilemmas of eliminating gender oppression are rooted directly in gender relations as such. For example, suppose it is the case that if male domination were eliminated, biological reproduction would drop drastically. For reasons that are not now understood (this concocted argument goes), the cultural values that support having children require gender inequality to be sustained. In a society without gender oppression, therefore, few women would have children, and thus demographic collapse would occur. The very reproduction of society, therefore, would be threatened by the elimination of gender oppression. Under such conditions, gender-based macro-institutional arrangements would have to be organized to ensure adequate breeding and such arrangements

16. Such a claim need not imply that male domination serves some essential *function* for capitalism. Male domination – like pollution and environmental degradation – could even be harmful for capitalism and yet eliminating male domination could be impossible in capitalist societies because of cost and other constraints.

might well contradict the emancipatory objectives of the feminist project.

While this argument may be ridiculous, it has the same form as the efficiency-collapse effects postulated by the absence of class inequality: the unintended consequences of the elimination of a form of oppression undermine the material conditions necessary for sustaining the society and thus sustaining the emancipatory project itself. The critical point is that whereas in the Marxist context there are credible arguments of this sort raised by class-egalitarians that call into question the viability of the Marxist emancipatory project, such arguments are not raised (at least not by egalitarians) against gender equality.

It is important to be very clear on what is being claimed here. I am not denying that macro-social phenomena are deeply *gendered* in the sense that their form and consequences are shaped by gender relations in a variety of ways. Nor am I saying that there are no gender obstacles to transforming macro-institutions. The power that men wield economically, politically, and culturally constitutes large obstacles to the transformation of the macro-institutions that contribute to sustaining male dominance, just as the power of capitalists constitutes a significant obstacle to transforming the macro-institutions of capitalism. None of this implies, however, that there are any inherent gender dilemmas posed by the transformation of those macro-institutions. In the absence of credible arguments that macro-arrangements free of gender domination would self-destruct *for gender reasons*, it is therefore perfectly reasonable to extrapolate from the prefigurative experiences of gender equality at the micro-level to the society as a whole. With such extrapolations in hand, then the core feminist theses – existing relations are oppressive and these relations are socially constructed – seem to imply the practical viability of the emancipatory transformation of the relations.

Classical Marxism and the Viability of Socialism/Communism

Unlike the issue of the viability of a society without male domination, socialist theorists have never been able completely to by-pass the problem of the feasibility of socialism. And Marxists have often felt it necessary at least to make gestures towards arguments for the viability of communism (complete classlessness). In classical Marxism, this issue was handled in a particularly elegant – if ultimately unsatisfactory – way through the development of a theory of history, generally referred to as “historical materialism.” Even though most Marxists today reject the rather deterministic cast of classical historical materialism, it is neverthe-

less worth reviewing the core arguments of the classical theory since the way it solves the problem of linking the emancipatory project to an explanatory theory remains an important part of the Marxist intellectual terrain.¹⁷

Historical materialism can be divided into what might be called the "General Theory of History," which attempts to chart and explain the overall trajectory of human history, and the "Special Theory of Capitalist History," which more modestly tries to explain the trajectory of capitalist development from its emergence to its demise. While the Special Theory is of more relevance for understanding the problems contemporary Marxism faces in defending its emancipatory project, it will be helpful to first briefly review the General Theory itself.

Since the internal logic of the General Theory of History has been recently subjected to such rigorous scrutiny by G.A. Cohen, I will only sketch out the central contours of the argument here.¹⁸ Within historical materialism, the history of humankind is seen as developing in a systematic way through a series of stages defined by their distinctive social organizations of production. Each stage is characterized by a particular combination of forces of production and relations of production, and the central dynamics of the system come from the ways in which the forces and relations of production interact. More specifically, Cohen has elaborated this interaction in the following form:

1. The forces of production have a tendency to develop in history. This Cohen calls the "Development Thesis."
2. At any given level of development of the forces of production, there is some set of relations of production which will be optimal for the further development of the forces of production.
3. There will be a tendency for those relations of production which are optimal for the development of the forces of production to be selected (through an unspecified process of class struggle) because they are optimal.

17. To avoid misunderstanding, it is important to avoid equating "Marxism" with "historical materialism." Historical materialism is a particular way of theorizing the overall trajectory of historical development. Much of what is intellectually valuable in the Marxist tradition does not depend upon the validity of this general theory of history. Marxism is also a form of class analysis of social institutions. While Marxist class analysis is embedded in an understanding of historical *variation*, it need not presuppose a theory of historical *trajectory* (i.e. a theory of the inherent tendencies for historical variations in class relations to follow some developmental path). For a further discussion of the relationship between class analysis and historical materialism, see Erik Olin Wright, Andrew Levine, and Elliott Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism*, London 1992, Part I; and chapter 12 below.

18. See G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a defense*, Princeton 1978. For an appreciative critique, see Wright, Levine, and Sober, chapter 2.

4. The relations that exist, therefore, have the form they do because that form of relations best facilitates the development of the forces of production.¹⁹ This is the essential statement of the functional explanation of the relations of production by the forces of production.
5. Within all class-based relations of production, there is a limit to the maximum possible development of the forces of production, and thus eventually the further development of the forces of production will be blocked (or, to use Marx's term, "fettered").
6. When such fettering occurs, the now dysfunctional relations of production will be replaced (according to thesis 3 above) with new relations of production capable of unfettering the subsequent development of the forces of production.

If the General Theory of historical materialism could be shown to be true, then it would offer a powerful analytical tool for sustaining the Marxist emancipatory project. Capitalism, after all, is a class-based mode of production, and thus according to (4) will eventually fetter the development of the forces of production. When it does so, according to (5) those relations will eventually be replaced by new ones which will unfetter the forces. Eventually, therefore, a society without class exploitation is predicted by the theory since class modes of production eventually exhaust their capacity to develop the forces of production.²⁰

The problem is that there is little reason to believe the General Theory as such. That is, at the level of abstraction of "relations of production" and "forces of production" it is hard to imagine what mechanism could exist which guarantees the eventual fettering of the forces of production by all class-based relations of production. Marx certainly never provided an actual argument for an inherent tendency for fettering at that level of abstraction, and neither does Cohen in his reconstruction of Marx's argument.

The validity of the generalizations within the General Theory, there-

19. One can slightly soften this statement without undermining its essential structure, by saying: "The *probability* of a given set of relations existing is determined by the *extent to which* those relations are optimal for the further development of the forces of production. There is therefore a *tendency* for the relations to be what they are because they facilitate the development of the forces." The probabilistic form retains the functional form of Cohen's interpretation of historical materialism without implying a unique, deterministic historical trajectory.

20. Even if Marx was wrong that capitalism was the last form of class society, and a new form of class society would replace capitalism according to thesis (5), still eventually that society would also fetter the forces of production according to thesis (4) and thus would eventually be replaced. Unless one believes that there is an indefinite number of new class modes of production, therefore, eventually a society without classes will occur.

fore, depends upon the validity of the various Special Theories of the history of the different modes of production that comprise the trajectory of the General Theory. That is, there is a special Theory of Pre-class Society History, a Special Theory of Feudal History, and a Special Theory of Capitalist History. For each of these theories there may be convincing arguments for the inevitability of fettering and transformation.²¹ In particular, for present purposes, the critical issue is the validity of the Special Theory of Capitalist History.

Marx put a great deal of effort into developing the Special Theory of the fettering of forces of production within capitalism. His strongest arguments are contained in the quasi-deterministic theory of the long-run nonviability of capitalism based on his famous "Law of the Tendency of the Falling Rate of Profit."²² Without going into the technical details of the argument of the falling rate of profit, Marx argued that by virtue of the inherent competitive dynamics of capitalism, combined with the difficulties capitalists face in extracting labor effort from workers, there will be a systematic tendency in capitalism for capitalists to substitute machines for labor (or, as he put it, for the "organic composition of capital to rise"). However, according to Marx's analysis of the labor theory of value, the rate of profit is fundamentally a function of the amount of surplus labor time performed in production. By substituting machines for labor-power, therefore, capitalists reduce the amount of labor time in production available for exploitation, and this ultimately erodes the rate of profit. The decline in the average rate of profit, in turn, makes capitalism as a whole more and more vulnerable, since random shocks, tendencies for overproduction, etc., will more easily push the rate of profit to zero or below.

The key point is that *if* there is an inherent, forceful tendency for the rate of profit to fall, and *if* the available "counter-tendencies" cannot ultimately block this decline, then there is a high probability that eventually capitalism will stagnate and the forces of production will become fettered, since in capitalism the only source of resources for new investment and innovation come from capitalistic profits. If the Law of Tendency held true, therefore, capitalism would ultimately become

21. If each of these Special Theories were shown to be valid, then collectively they could provide the justification for the generalization contained within the General Theory of History, but they would still not provide a defense of the General Theory as such since there is no independent theoretical argument for the explanatory mechanisms in the general theory itself.

22. I refer to this theory as "quasi-deterministic" since Marx is careful to describe a set of counter-tendencies to the general tendency he proposes. While he does argue that in some unspecified long run these counter-tendencies cannot permanently block the primary tendency, nevertheless most of his arguments simply imply the strong probability that the rate of profit will fall, not that that fall is inevitable.

unreproducible as a social order. This does not mean that socialism would only occur in the aftermath of the catastrophic collapse of capitalism. People may become committed to socialism out of the belief that capitalism will collapse, and through such commitments bring about the demise of capitalism before it would have self-destructed. In any event, the theory provides a strong basis for predicting the eventual non-sustainability of capitalism as a social order.

The thesis of the likely long-term nonviability of capitalism due to its self-destructive internal contradictions is crucial for the traditional Marxist theory of socialism. The burden on the theory to demonstrate positively the superiority of socialism (let alone communism) over capitalism is reduced if it can be demonstrated that ultimately capitalism itself is nonviable. Socialism could be plagued with all sorts of inefficiencies, dilemmas, and uncertainties, and yet be preferable to moribund capitalism. Furthermore, if indeed capitalism becomes nonviable and thus ceases itself to be an alternative to socialism, then the political will to cope with dilemmas internal to socialism and creatively devise novel solutions would increase, thus rendering socialism itself more attractive. Given that his theory of the laws of motion of capitalism predicts its eventual non-reproducibility, Marx could perhaps be excused for refusing to elaborate blueprints or even systematic arguments for the sustainability of socialism/communism as the alternative to capitalism. It was enough to say that the workers would be in control and that through their creative energies, through trial and error and systematic experimentation, the precise institutional forms of socialism, and later communism, would be produced.

Unfortunately, the debates over the labor theory of value in recent years have raised very serious issues with the Law of the Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall. Not only have the general claims of the labor theory of value to explain the rate of profit in terms of labor value been seriously challenged, but even within the terms of the labor theory of value, the specific claim that there is any tendency for the "organic composition of capital" to rise indefinitely (and thus for the rate of profit to have a tendency to fall) has been shown to be at best very problematic and at worst simply wrong.

There may, of course, be other kinds of dynamic tendencies within capitalism, besides the hypothesized tendency of the rate of profit to fall, which could potentially provide a basis for predicting the eventual socialist transformation of capitalism. Indeed, Marx himself often advanced other arguments besides the strong theory of capitalist nonviability driven by the falling rate of profit, most notably his frequent reference to the contradiction between the increasing social character of production and the enduring private character of capitalist appropri-

tion. The increasing social character of production signaled the increasing capacity of workers themselves to organize production and deploy the means of production for the satisfaction of human needs and the expression of human creative energies; the enduring private appropriation by capitalists blocked the realization of this potential by directing production towards the goal of private profits and the expansion of capital.²³ The tendency for this "contradiction" to increase does not itself depend upon the falling rate of profit (although the falling rate of profit would render this contradiction more destabilizing); it merely depends upon a claim about the trajectory of organizational forms of capitalist production. Socialism, then, becomes the solution to this contradiction by creating a new social form of appropriation compatible with the already developed social character of production.

G.A. Cohen also elaborates a view of capitalist development and its "distinctive contradictions" that does not hinge on the falling rate of profit.²⁴ He proposes that while capitalism may not actually fetter the sheer *growth* of the forces of production in the manner postulated in historical materialism, it fetters the *rational use* of those forces of production (through waste, a bias for consumption over leisure, ecological damage, etc.). What Cohen calls "use fettering," then, could provide the rationale for socialism, at least if one were convinced that socialism would "unfetter" the rational use of the means of production.

Marx may be correct that as capitalism develops there is an increasing contradiction between social production and private appropriation, and Cohen may well be correct that capitalism suffers increasingly from use fettering. But these processes would only lead one to predict the eventual triumph of socialism if it could also be shown that they constituted powerful motivations for people (especially workers) to struggle to overthrow capitalism in favor of socialism. In the case of the theory of the tendency of the falling rate of profit, much weaker motivational assumptions are needed, since in the long run capitalism itself becomes unreproducible. Neither of the alternative formulations of capitalism's distinctive contradictions – social production/private appropriation and use fettering – by themselves imply that capitalism as an economic system has any tendency to become unsustainable, and thus they only become effective arguments for socialism (let alone communism) if socialism can be shown to be superior to capitalism. This, again, requires a positive theory of the viability of the emancipatory alternative to capitalism.

23. In Marx's words from volume III of *Capital*: "The contradiction between the general social power into which capital develops, on the one hand, and the private power of the individual capitalist over these social conditions of production, on the other, becomes ever more irreconcilable . . ."

24. G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a defense*, Princeton 1978.

This failure to develop a convincing theory of the fatal fettering of the forces of production in capitalism matters because, as already suggested, it is a far from simple task to demonstrate convincingly the practical superiority of socialism over capitalism, particularly in the aftermath of the collapse of social experiments carried out in the name of socialism. Capitalism may be damaging to masses of people, oppressive and exploitative; it may embody contradictions between the deeply social-cooperative character of its productive forces and its system of private appropriation; and it may block the rational deployment of those forces of production to meet human needs. Yet people may still prefer actually existing capitalism to an alternative with uncertain characteristics and dynamics whose viability is open to serious challenge by sympathetic (let alone hostile) critics. In the absence of a credible theory of the inherent tendency for capitalism to move towards catastrophic collapse, a positive theory of the viability of socialism and communism becomes essential.

The importance of this task is widely recognized by socialists. Even in the heyday of the intellectual sway of relatively deterministic versions of Marxism, there was some discussion of the problem of the design of socialist institutions and of the conditions under which socialism could be sustainable. In recent years there has been a proliferation of serious theoretical and empirical work exploring these issues. No comparable body of theory and research on the problem of the viability of eliminating gender oppression has yet developed within feminism. This is *not* an indictment of the theoretical work of contemporary feminists. Rather, it is a reflection of the different theoretical agendas imposed by the differences in two emancipatory projects.

Implications for the Form of Explanatory Theory

At the core of the Marxist tradition is a set of quasi-deterministic theories in which the "laws of motion" of social systems tend to propel social change along specific trajectories. Sometimes these deterministic arguments are relatively strong, as in classical historical materialism. Other times they are considerably weakened, taking the form of arguments about underlying tendencies and counter-tendencies which only generate probabilities of particular courses of development rather than unique paths. And sometimes – especially in certain strands of contemporary Marxism – determinism is rejected altogether in favor of a theoretical framework emphasizing the open interplay of structure and agency. Capitalism, as a result, is seen as having no inherent tendencies of development. Even in this case, however, anti-deterministic arguments are constantly in a dialogue with the more deterministic (sometime called

“economistic”) variants of Marxism, since determinism is such an integral part of this intellectual tradition.

Feminism, in contrast, has characteristically taken the form of a much more agent-centered theory, in which there is no particular tendency for social change to move along a given trajectory. With a few exceptions, feminists do not posit “laws of motion” of patriarchy of even a probabilistic character towards self-destruction. The prospects for women’s liberation depend crucially on consciousness raising and on culturally oriented emancipatory struggles. The problem of determinism is generally not a central preoccupation.²⁵

If the analysis of this chapter is correct, then perhaps one of the reasons why Marxism has often taken a relatively deterministic form is precisely because such deterministic arguments helped to pre-empt a serious problem confronting emancipatory class theories, namely the credibility of the radical egalitarian alternative embodied in the revolutionary project. Marx certainly relied heavily on the “scientific” argument that socialism is the necessary culmination of laws of motion of capitalism as a way of discrediting and dismissing the moral arguments for socialism of the “utopian socialists” and the various proposals extant in his era for blueprints of a socialist society. Workers would join the revolution because socialism is inevitable and hastening its arrival was in their interests, not because of an abstract belief in its morality or the credibility of its institutional design.²⁶

25. There are, of course, some feminists who deploy more deterministic frameworks for analyzing variations in gender relations, especially within those strands of feminist theory that are most heavily influenced by the Marxist tradition. For example, although she clearly rejects class determinism, Mary O’Brien, in *The Politics of Reproduction*, Boston 1981, translates the Marxist notion of a “dialectic” between the forces and relations of production into an account of the dialectic of forces and relations of reproduction to produce a relatively deterministic account of the transformation of gender relations. A similar kind of argument is found in Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, New York 1971. Judith Chafetz’s book, *Gender Equity: an Integrated Theory of Stability and Change*, Newbery Park 1990, is a more sociological work on gender inequality that also has a somewhat deterministic cast. These kinds of deterministic arguments, however, are outside of the central thrust of most feminist theory which emphasizes the relatively open, non-deterministic character of the future of gender relations.

26. It might seem a paradox that workers would join a movement for socialism when they believed that capitalism will destroy itself by its own internal dynamics, thus making socialism inevitable. G. A. Cohen, in *History, Labour and Freedom*, Oxford 1989, explains this paradox by arguing that the prediction of the inevitable demise of capitalism is itself made on the basis of the theory of workers’ rational agency. That is, the supersession of capitalism by socialism is inevitable precisely because workers respond to the conditions of capitalism in a rational way. The analysis presented here goes further than Cohen’s argument by arguing that the theory of the inevitability of the demise of capitalism was essential for rendering socialism/communism credible, and that workers would therefore be less likely to join a revolutionary movement if they feel that the viability of socialism is an open question.

Feminist theory does not so acutely face this problem, and thus feminists have less reason to be attracted to such deterministic theoretical currents. Given that the emancipatory project has relatively high existential validity to feminists, and given the plausibility of extrapolating from individual micro-level experiences to society as a whole, the viability of a society without gender domination and oppression is generally not viewed as deeply problematic by people who share the normative commitments of feminists. There is thus no pressure from the emancipatory goals of feminism to come up with a deterministic theory of the internal contradictions of patriarchy which push it on a trajectory towards its self-destruction.

Whether or not these differences in the nature of their emancipatory projects actually help explain the tendencies towards determinism in Marxian socialist theory and non-determinism in feminism, the fact remains that historical materialism did provide a convenient solution to a very difficult problem for Marxist theory. The theoretical advances in recent years, however, have seriously undermined the credibility of both the General Theory of Historical Materialism and the Special Theory of Capitalist History. This certainly does not in and of itself imply that the emancipatory project of Marxism is bankrupt, nor that the explanatory capacity of Marxism as a tradition of social theory has been exhausted. But it does mean that the task of developing a more systematic, positive theory of a classless society is imperative if this emancipatory project is to regain credibility.