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What Could It Mean to Say, “Capitalism Causes Sexism and Racism?”

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ABSTRACT. Marxism is a materialist theory that centers economic life in its analysis of the human social world. This materialist orientation manifests in explanations that take economic class to play a fundamental causal role in determining the emergence, character, and development of race- and sex-based oppression—indeed, of all forms of identity-based oppression within class societies. To say that labor is mediated by class in a class-based society is to say that, in such societies, the class-based division of that activity which produces and reproduces the human species is the definite form in which labor appears, and that the human life which is the product of that self-making activity bears its stamp. Marxism’s emphasis on economic factors as central in the constitution and development of human life has been seized upon as evidence of its alleged “class reductionism”—its supposed tendency to think of all aspects of human life as direct and simple expressions of a class relation. No such thing follows; quite the opposite, a correct understanding of the relationships among capitalism, racism, and sexism only further highlights how central the struggle against each is to the struggles against any of the others.

INTRODUCTION

As is well known, Marxism is a materialist theory that centers economic life in its analysis of the human social world. This materialist orientation manifests in explanations that take economic class to play a fundamental causal role in determining the emergence, character, and development of race- and sex-based oppression—indeed, of all forms of identity-based oppression within class societies. That is in part to say, Marxist theory interprets human life as a form of existence that is best understood not principally as a consequence of the ideas that human beings have in their minds, but rather, principally as a consequence of how and under what circumstances they interact with their natural and social environment to satisfy their subsistence needs as biological beings.

As Marx and Engels write in the first pages of their *Critique of the German Ideology*,

The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organization of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature. [...] Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their material life. The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the means of subsistence they actually find in existence and have to reproduce.¹

In setting forth this observation, Marx and Engels seek to distinguish their “materialist conception of history” from the conceptions of human nature one finds among, for example, classical liberal theorists. The essence of human nature is not the human capacity for reason, nor humans’ supposedly “natural” independence or freedom, nor even any combination of these. Rather, one locates human nature not in any one particular aspect of human life but rather in the ongoing, generative process that gives rise to these various forms in which human life appears. For Marx and Engels, that process is labor: the metabolic relationship between human beings and their world.² It is humans’ specific mode of interaction with the world in which they exist, and of which they must make use in order to sustain their lives, that explains how it is that humans are as they are.

1. Marx and Engels, *The Critique of the German Ideology*, *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (MECW) 5:31.

2. Marx and Engels, *Capital*, MECW 35:187. Marx and Engels write, “Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material reactions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature’s productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature.”

In class societies, such as capitalism, which is the form of class society I attend to most closely here, that labor is organized in a manner mediated by class divisions. On a local level, this is not wholly and uniformly the case for human labor even today: there are groupings of human beings around the globe who live in formations that are not reasonably thought of as “capitalist” in nature. However, by and large, the “existence of living human individuals” which is the “premise” of human history is, in our current period, based upon productive work that is organized around capitalist exchange. This work is conducted by people who must sell their capacity to labor in order to earn a wage, and who work on raw materials, with tools, and in factories that are privately owned by a small economic minority, and then sold for a price on the free market.

This mediation of labor by the category of class is a *material* relation. Labor “in itself” does not exist, and there is not actually any pure or abstract relationship between human beings and the environment within which they subsist, except in philosophy as a heuristic for thinking through the concept of labor. Actual laboring always takes a definite form. Insofar as in capitalist society, labor appears primarily as a task performed for another human being, at their direction, so that one may live, this is a particular social relationship between the laborer and the person to whom control and possession of that labor power is transferred by sale. Human beings produce their means of subsistence in precisely this way and under these conditions, “indirectly producing” all the rest of their material life. To say that labor is mediated by class in a class-based society is to say that, in such societies, the class-based division of that activity which produces and reproduces the human species is the definite form in which labor appears, and that the human life which is the product of that self-making activity bears its stamp.

Marxism’s emphasis on economic factors as central in the constitution and development of human life has been seized upon as evidence of its alleged “class reductionism”—its supposed tendency to think of all aspects of human life as direct and simple expressions of a class relation. “No one is *actually* worse off because of their race, or their sex,” a class reductionist might conclude; rather, the class reductionist view would have it that the socially disadvantaged position of those individuals who are categorized as nonwhite or nonmale can be explained entirely in terms of their financial disadvantage relative to better-off others who simply happen to be, largely speaking, white and/or male.

For an example of what a class reductionist approach to race and class might look like, imagine a discussion of race that proceeds from the assumption that the harms Black people encounter are articulable purely in terms of their class position. On such a view, a description of Blacks’ situation is fully exhausted by the economic description: they tend to have less wealth, to earn lower wages, and to be disproportionately poor and working class. One might then conclude that the problems facing Blacks can be corrected simply by improving conditions for poor and working-class people. The specific challenges facing Black people are, on this picture, simply “reduced” to their economic challenges.

One could resolve sexism into similar terms. Women by and large experience worse wages, receive higher rates of harassment on the job, and have less wealth than men do. These factors often conspire to make women dependent upon men in conditions of petty domestic tyranny within patriarchal relationship structures. Perhaps, a “class reductionist” about sexism might then think, everything that is specifically bad about being a woman in capitalist society can be explained in terms of her economic situation.

The critics who fault Marxism along these lines argue that Marxist theory fails to distinguish itself from this type of vulgar class reductionism and relegates racism and sexism to mere “epiphenomenal” status, considering these to be “less real” than class-based exploitation, and almost needless to say, also taking race and sex to be “less real” than economic class. It would follow from the class reductionist position, then, that race- and sex-based oppression are best addressed not by activism that is pointedly antiracist and antisexist as such, but rather by strict focus on interventions aimed purely at addressing those social ills that can be described just in terms of the exploitation of workers *qua* workers.

The relationship between class-based exploitation and identity-based oppression in Marxist theory is at once far more complex and also far more plausible and intuitive than such criticisms and interpretations suggest. My principal aim in this discussion is to defend the Marxist claim that race- and sex-based oppression are, indeed, “caused” by capitalist economic relations. But the claim, “Capitalism causes identity-based oppression,” does not at all necessarily entail epiphenomenalism, and is totally compatible with the observation that identity-based oppressions can and do in turn influence the development of economic relations. To cast Marxism’s approach to oppression and exploitation as one that conceives identity-based oppression as an “epiphenomenon” of class-based exploitation is interpretively weak in that it requires jettisoning historical materialism’s distinctive emphasis on the developing interaction between material and ideal aspects of human social being.³

In addition to this, I have here also two additional core aims. The first of these is to clarify what it means, in any case, to say that Marxism is a “class-based” theory, and to situate it vis-à-vis other theories that center or foreground other social categories. In doing this, I will return to the theme of how class is most usefully thought of as “mediating” the category of labor. The second of the aforementioned aims is to push back against the assumption that if class is more fundamentally determining than are race or sex, then this must mean that antiracism and antisexism are futile or trivial endeavors. No such thing follows; quite the opposite, a correct understanding of the relationships among capitalism, racism, and sexism only further highlights how central the struggle against each is to the struggle against any of the others.

3. Kevin B. Anderson raises a similar point in his 2018, “Marx at 200”: “Marx was not an economic or class reductionist, for throughout his career, he considered deeply various forms of oppression and resistance to capital and the state that were not based entirely upon class, but also upon nationality, race and ethnicity, and gender.”

In the immediately following section, I will offer a necessarily brief account of Marx's and Engels's "materialist conception of history." I go on to explain why, although "class-based" is in most contexts a perfectly suitable shorthand, a more perspicuous one might refer to Marxism as rather a "*production*-based" theory. Marxist theory's most distinctive feature is its radical, thoroughgoing insistence upon understanding all of human social existence as itself produced by, and susceptible to, human alteration of our existence as a species, and of our various practices of self-making. From there, I go on to discuss how it is that capitalism may reasonably and nonreductively be said to *cause* sexism and racism. The cases are sufficiently distinct that it is necessary to treat them separately. I conclude by speaking to the question of whether racism and sexism would simply disappear immediately upon the abolition of capitalism, but I won't leave the reader hanging until then: the answer in brief is, "No, but it will help."

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

What we now generally refer to as "historical materialism" or as "dialectical materialism," Marx and Engels called their "materialist conception of history." To understand the full weight of this phrase, we have to keep in mind that for these thinkers, *all of Being is historical*, which is to say, it is all part of a single (yet differentiated), ongoing, dynamic process of development. All aspects of Being come into existence, and pass out of existence, at definite moments: only change is constant. It also means that the essential nature of human life is itself an activity: the labor process. What makes human life distinctive is humans' capacity to intervene rationally and consciously to direct the course of their own historical development collectively, as a species—that is, to intentionally "self-change."

Marx and Engels argued that it was possible to implement a single method—the method of historical materialism—for the study of this internally differentiated unity of historical development, and so they wrote,

We know only a single science, the science of history. One can look at history from two sides and divide it into the history of nature and the history of men. The two sides are, however, inseparable; the history of nature and the history of men are dependent on each other so long as men exist.⁴

It is in this sense that historical materialism is both an ontological theory about the nature of the world and a method of inquiry into the world. Humans come to know the nature of the world as historical, and as susceptible to conscious and rational intervention, in and through their attempts to change it: in praxis.

4. Marx and Engels, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:28.

For purposes of simple presentation (while acknowledging that some nuance will be lost), we can abstractly isolate three aspects of historical materialism: that it is historical, that it is materialist, and that it is dialectical.

We have already said a bit here and in the previous section about what it means to say that Marx's and Engels's method is "historical." Historical materialism is, also obviously *materialist*, which is to say that in the relationship between material (concrete, physical) aspects of Being and ideal (abstract, conceptual) aspects of Being, it is the material conditions that play the chief and fundamentally determining role in shaping the development of material and ideal factors, and of the interplay between them. It is vital to point out that this does not mean that material conditions play the *sole* role. They do not. Ideas play a crucial part, which is one of the core features distinguishing Marx and Engels's historical materialism from numerous earlier materialisms. In fact, in the third of his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx writes,

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that *circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself*. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.⁵

Marx's materialism *includes* human beings and their practical activity as part of the material conditions that determine the course of history, making it incorrect to suggest that Marx's picture is one of human beings pushed along by inexorable—and nonhuman—laws of fate. His point, rather, is that the "education of the educator"—the seeding of revolutionary ideas in the minds of human beings—is the result not of "pure thought" but rather of a kind of intellectual metabolism between human minds and the world of which they are a part. *Ideas are not epiphenomenal to matter*; they are an inseparable aspect of one unified whole made up of both matter and ideas, and for Marx, no correct, materialist account of how human activity and self-changing takes place can be complete without a full appreciation of the role that ideas play. This is crucial to understanding the Marxist characterization of the interplay between class-based exploitation and identity-based oppressions, and we will return to it later.

This brings us to the point that Marx's and Engels's materialist conception of history is *dialectical*. The dynamic and processual character that they attribute to Being, they posit as driven forward by the tension, the conflict, between mutually conditioning, and mutually opposing, material forces. *In a capitalist society, the most significant of these for the character of human social existence is the conflict between those who perform labor and those who control the products of labor*. In this sense, we call Marxism a "class-based" theory; yet, it is also correct to think

5. Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, MECW 5:4.

of Marxism more broadly as a *production*-based theory. In the case of capitalism, the production and reproduction of human life—including social phenomena such as identity-based oppression—is thoroughly mediated by the class conflict between those who perform labor and those who control its products. Marxism as a production-based theory of human life is the focus of the following section.

CLASS-BASED, BUT MORE TO THE POINT, *PRODUCTION*-BASED

A recurring complaint against Marxist social theory is that its emphasis on class strikes its critics as, in some key and troubling sense, arbitrary. What justification is there for the argument that one relation—the class relation—plays the kind of central, foundational role that Marx claims for it? The oppression of those who are not cis male has at least as much *prima facie* claim, if not more, to pervasiveness across the human condition. Many more acts of genocidal violence and harm have been committed explicitly in the name of race or something like it than have been carried out explicitly in the name of class. So how is it not simply a kind of tunnel vision to claim that class is central? How is it plausible to say that capitalism is the cause of identity-based oppression given that we know, for example, that sexist oppression *precedes* capitalism, and certainly has at least as much claim to “materiality” as class does (perhaps more, given that sexism tends to be tied to certain natural, biological features of human bodies while class exploitation generally does not)?

Famously, Marx and Engels open the first chapter of *The Communist Manifesto* with the line, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.” But what is less well known is that in the 1888 edition, Engels added a footnote:

That is, all written history. In 1847, the pre-history of society, the social organisation existing previous to recorded history, all but unknown. Since then, August von Haxthausen (1792–1866) discovered common ownership of land in Russia, Georg Ludwig von Maurer proved it to be the social foundation from which all Teutonic races started in history, and, by and by, village communities were found to be, or to have been, the primitive form of society everywhere from India to Ireland. The inner organisation of this primitive communistic society was laid bare, in its typical form, by Lewis Henry Morgan’s (1818–1861) crowning discovery of the true nature of the gens and its relation to the tribe. With the dissolution of the primeval communities, society begins to be differentiated into separate and finally antagonistic classes. I have attempted to retrace this dissolution in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, second edition, Stuttgart, 1886.⁶

To call Marxism “class-based” is in a certain sense a kind of shorthand, one that is clarifying in most contexts but only with important caveats in place. Marxist

6. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:482.

theory argues that class is central in a class society. Speaking more broadly, it might be more accurate to say that Marxism is a “production-based” theory. It regards humans’ activity of producing and reproducing themselves as the fundamental human activity that every aspect of human social life is related to and is to be explained in virtue of. It so happens that in a class society, this activity of production and reproduction is thoroughly mediated by class. There is no labor just in the abstract—only labor as it is actually carried out, under the conditions within which it is carried out.

The questions with which I opened this section of our discussion largely arise from thinking of class as structurally analogous to race and sex—as another social identity category just like any other.⁷ Workers do experience “classism”—oppression on the basis of their working-class identity. They experience this for example when their specifically class-marked ways of speaking, eating, and dressing are marginalized and treated as inherently inferior to the habits of elites. But this oppression is importantly analytically distinct from class *exploitation*, which is an economic relation in which the value of their labor is systematically extracted from them.⁸

When a Marxist approach to understanding race, sex, and class argues that class has a special role, the claim is not that classist *oppression* occupies a distinct role over and above any other form of identity-based oppression. Rather, the alienated relationship between the worker and their product is also the *exploitative* relationship between the worker and their employer. Under capitalism, this exploitation of labor is the central relation within which human existence is produced and reproduced. In it, one identifies the character of labor as essential human activity not in the abstract, but concretely, as it is manifested in capitalist society.

In identifying the particular manner in which human beings produce and reproduce their lives, we equip ourselves to gain further insight into the nature of their products, including such social phenomena as racist and sexist practices and ideas. We also approach such phenomena not as natural, permanent, immutable

7. For this reason, in her 2001 “Marxism and Class, Gender, and Race,” Martha Gimenez writes, “class is not simply another ideology legitimating oppression; it denotes exploitative relations between people mediated by their relations to the means of production.”

8. Along similar lines, in her 2019, “Intersectionality: A Marxist Critique,” Barbara Foley writes, “the ways in which productive human activity is organized—and, in class-based society, compels the mass of the population to be divided up into various categories in order to insure that the many will be divided from one another and will labor for the benefit of the few—this class-based organization constitutes the principal issue requiring investigation if we wish to understand the roots of social inequality. To say this is not to ‘reduce’ gender or ‘race’ to class as modes of oppression. It is, rather, to insist that the distinction between exploitation and oppression makes possible an understanding of the material (i.e., socially grounded) roots of oppressions of various kinds. It is also to posit that ‘classism,’ a frequently heard term, is a deeply flawed concept. For this term often views class to [*sic*] a set of prejudiced attitudes, equivalent to ideologies of racism and sexism.”

I concur, broadly speaking, with Foley, although I would add that class does function both as a site of oppression and of exploitation. Foley is absolutely right, however, that the exploitative character of class is often elided in discussions of “classism.”

features of human social life, but rather as particular human products that came into being at definite moments in time and are sufficiently susceptible to rational human intervention that in the course of history, they can be made to pass back out of being.

To say that economic production is in this way “basic,” “fundamental,” “ontologically prior,” or “essential” is not to say that the categories of race and sex, much less the phenomena of racism and sexism, are “unreal.” Here, it is helpful to keep in mind some core features of how Marx, following Hegel, conceives of the relationship between essence and appearance. An “appearance”—such as a socially constructed race or sex category—is not an “unreal” hollow illusion. It is a real, practical expression of human life as it actually exists in conditions within which race and sex, and racism and sexism, have been produced as part of our social world.

As Marx and Engels themselves insist, there are no humans in the abstract. Let us recall one of the initial premises upon which they base the theory and method of historical materialism:

The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity.⁹

Understanding economic production as basic/fundamental/essential allows us to understand race, class, sex, and other social categories as aspects of one developing and interrelated whole, shaped and determined by a process internal to it: labor, the process of human self-changing.

“CAPITALISM CAUSES SEXISM”

We know that the oppression of women well precedes the emergence of capitalism onto the world stage. So how can it make sense to say that “capitalism causes sexism?” This claim cannot of course mean that women’s oppression did not exist prior to capitalism, nor that were it not for capitalism, the oppression of women would not have appeared in the course of history, nor that were capitalism to be destroyed tomorrow, sexism would automatically tumble into the dustbin of history right along with it.

Capitalism did not bring women’s oppression initially into being. However, the treatment of women under capitalism is a phenomenon that human beings produce—as such, it is conditioned by the same dynamics that condition all of human productive activity. What exists in reality is not productive labor in the abstract but rather productive labor carried out by particular human beings under

9. Marx and Engels, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:31.

definite circumstances. As such, the status of women, within a society in which humans' subsistence needs are met through capitalist relations of production, cannot be anything other than what is made possible by those particular relations. If we organized our productive activity in some other manner, then those productive relations would condition our social identities and the treatment that attaches to them, instead.

There is a clear complication in this picture of the relationship between class and sex, which is that human beings are, generally speaking, themselves the product of sexual relations between men and women. Because sexual reproduction is a necessary precondition for the existence of any particular human individual, it is plausible to suppose that sexual division has as much claim to be a central determining feature of human existence as class does, if not more so.

I have already spoken briefly to the fact that while this critique does have immediate plausibility if we think of class as an identity category that is roughly analogous to others, much of that plausibility is diminished when we consider that the *reason* class, capitalism, and economic exploitation come up at all, is that these are defining aspects of the specific determinate character of *labor*, of human self-making, as it appears within capitalism. However, this still leaves lingering questions regarding the relationship(s) among economic production, sexual reproduction, and the status of women. Sexual reproduction, child-rearing, and other forms of domestic work are themselves elements of economic production. So why aren't sexist oppression, and sex as a social category, not at least more clearly subsumed within economic production for Marx, and considered part of the material "base" of human life? The answer is that actually, *they are*, but in a manner that cannot be fully captured by the abstract separation of "sex and class."

Let us pause here to examine a key passage from *The German Ideology*. Marx asserts, first of all, the primacy of human beings' biological nature in determining their life activity:

[W]e must begin by stating the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, the premise, namely, that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to "make history." But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing and various other things. *The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself.* And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life.¹⁰

This is straightforward enough. Insofar as human beings are biological beings of a certain kind, the satisfaction of their biological requirements is the absolute precondition of their existence and thus, of all their human activity. Marx goes on to describe a second feature of humans as natural, biological beings:

10. Ibid., 5:65–66.

The second point is that the satisfaction of the first need, the action of satisfying and the instrument of satisfaction which has been acquired, leads to new needs; and *this creation of new needs is the first historical act.*¹¹

And now something peculiar has happened. He has just listed both the production of the means of subsistence to satisfy biological needs, *and* the production of new needs in the course of that activity, as “the first historical act.” How can that be? Marx then complicates the picture further still:

The third circumstance which, from the very outset, enters into historical development, is that men, who daily re-create their own life, begin to make other men, to propagate their kind: the relation between man and woman, parents and children, the *family*.¹²

So now we are told that it is sexual reproduction that occurs at the outset of human social existence. What is happening here? The answer to the riddle is that these are not three distinct acts, but rather three descriptions of the very same productive activity that constitutes essential human nature. Humans make themselves—both naturally, as all sexually reproducing biological beings do, producing more of their own number—and socially, radically transforming the character of human life in and through activity initially aimed at simply sustaining themselves biologically. Marx comes back to this point later on in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, insisting that consumption is always directly also production, and vice versa; they are, to be a bit Hegelian about it, mutually conditioning moments of a single processual unity.¹³

Here in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels say of subsistence, of social development, and of sexual reproduction:

These three aspects of social activity are not of course to be taken as three different stages, but just as three aspects or, to make it clear to the Germans, three ‘moments’, which have existed simultaneously since the dawn of history and the first men, and which still assert themselves in history today.

The production of life, both of one’s own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a twofold relation: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relation—social in the sense that it

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 5:43.

13. Marx writes, “Production is thus directly consumption, consumption is directly production. Each is immediately its opposite. At the same time, however, a mediating movement takes place between the two. Production mediates consumption, for which it provides the material; consumption without production would have no object. But consumption also mediates production, by providing for the products the subject for whom they are products. The product only attains its final finish in consumption. A railway on which no one travels, which is therefore not used up, not consumed, is only a railway *δυνάμει*, not in reality. Without production there is no consumption, but without consumption there is no production either, since in that case production would be useless.” (Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 28:28–29)

denotes the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end. It follows from this that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation, or social stage, and this mode of co-operation is itself a 'productive force'.¹⁴

Human sexual reproduction exists nowhere "in itself" nor "in the abstract," except in theory. It appears concretely under definite circumstances that are themselves practically inseparable from it. In order to be in a position to give birth, a woman must satisfy her subsistence needs and those of the fetus inside her.¹⁵ In a capitalist society, if she is a member of the working class, she does this either by selling her labor for a wage or, commonly, by accessing necessary resources in a relationship mediated by a male partner's sale of his labor-power. The economic relation of wage labor thus thoroughly conditions the process of sexual reproduction.

Women's oppression, sexism, and the oppression of non-cis male people more broadly, are not natural, essential, or ineliminable features of human life. They are social products. That sexual reproduction occurs in human beings is a biological fact. It is, as Marx argues, an essential aspect of human productive activity. That sexual reproduction occurs under the whole set of conditions within which it does, and in the particular way that it does—which is to say, in a manner marked by sexual inequality—is a sociohistorical fact about it, which human beings have themselves caused to be the case, and could cause to be otherwise.

Transforming the social status of women is a key pillar of Marx's program. In the *Communist Manifesto*, he and Engels write of communism's approach to the problem of women's oppression, "[T]he real point aimed at is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production."¹⁶ Such a transformation can hardly be achieved in a society in which human beings *generally* appear as mere instruments of production. And in a society in which they do, it is not actually any wonder that women, who perform not only wage labor, but also the brunt of the biological work of sexual reproduction, experience a particularly intense form of oppression and experience economic exploitation more intensely, as well. In fact we know that in many forms of society *not* marked by the division of labor into those who perform it and those who direct it, we do not see the sort of wholesale subordinate position of women that is so endemic to capitalism.

"CAPITALISM CAUSES RACISM"

Modern, "scientific" racist ideology may reasonably be characterized as the theory that there are natural, heritable, traits on the basis of which human beings are

14. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, MECW 5:43.

15. And of course it is not only cis women who give birth, but also some transmen and nonbinary people, among others.

16. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:502.

categorized into groupings that are themselves in turn ordered within a “natural” hierarchy. Modern racism maintains that this supposedly “natural” hierarchy justifies—demands, even—a corresponding social hierarchy of the races, in which “superior” races dominate “inferior” ones.

This racist ideology draws upon theories of human difference and natural inequality, and techniques of social control, that precede capitalism. However, its coalescence into a scheme of supposedly biological differences that organize the species *Homo sapiens* into a collection of subspecies, each with its own assigned and fixed place within a normative hierarchy, occurred in tandem with the rise of capitalism as the dominant economic mode of production, and with the emergence and growth of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.¹⁷

Addressing the plausibility of the claim that “capitalism causes racism” takes a different form than does discussion of the relationship between capitalism and sexism. One reason for this is the following: while sexual difference is a natural, biological fact about human beings—albeit in a manner much more dynamic and diverse than typically cissexist accounts of sexual difference allow—racial difference is simply not a natural, biological feature of human life at all. Not only racism, but race itself, is thoroughly an artifact of specific ways in which human beings have ordered and interpreted their world. It is, as people say, a “social construct.” In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx offers us this useful account of the production of social relations and of theory:

[S]ocial relations are just as much produced by men as linen, flax, etc. Social relations are closely bound up with productive forces. [...] The same men who establish their social relations in conformity with the material productivity, produce also principles, ideas, and categories, in conformity with their social relations.¹⁸

Whether or not its status as a social construct makes race “illusory” or “unreal” has been the subject of much scholarly debate, and we will not relitigate that question here. Race is perfectly real, as of course, is racism. Critics of Marxism’s approach to ideology and to identity-based oppressions tend to voice concern about whether Marxism can adequately account for the reality of race and for its role in shaping human life, including its role in shaping the course of class struggle and the manner in which economic production takes place.

17. Rutledge M. Dennis notes in his 1995, “Social Darwinism, Scientific Racism, and the Metaphysics of Race,” for example, that “During the antebellum period in the United States, William Graham Sumner (1863) was the nation’s leading Social Darwinist; he was also the nation’s first sociologist. Sumner adopted [Herbert] Spencer’s ideas of laissez-faire government, natural selection, and survival of the fittest and applied them to American society. Essentially, he held that what is is Nature’s stamp of approval of what ought to be. Positioning the peculiar institution of American slavery within Darwinist and Spencerian frames of reference, Sumner reasoned that because slavery permitted superior groups the leisure to construct and develop more refined cultures, it actually advanced the cause of humanity. He viewed American society, particularly the American business class, as representative of the natural order of things and the living example of Spencer’s fitness thesis.” (p. 244)

18. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, MECW 6:165–66.

Earlier, in the section titled, “The Materialist Conception of History,” I wrote that on Marx’s theory, ideas are *not* epiphenomenal to matter; that rather, ideas and matter co-constitute each other as mutually conditioning aspects of one unified whole. I said that this would be crucial to understanding Marxism’s approach to theorizing the relationship between economic exploitation and identity-based oppressions. That is certainly true here. Again: there is no labor in the abstract, only the actual myriad forms of productive activity that human beings carry out, in the material conditions within which they live, and guided by the particular ideas that they hold—including, sometimes, racist ones. It is Marx who wrote that “material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses.”¹⁹ Recognizing that racism has been produced by human productive activity, and that it is maintained by the same process, allows us to envision that this process might also be redirected in such a manner as to cause racism to pass back out of existence, and to identify the means by which such a transformation might take place.

We spoke earlier of the danger of “class reductionism,” and the question of whether Marxism itself is a “class reductionist” theory. Charles Mills, who takes this question up across much of his work, puts the challenge in the following way in his 1990 “Getting Out of the Cave,” with respect to race and class in the Caribbean:

[A] Caribbean Marxism which wants to avoid reductionism cannot simply confine itself to the investigation of the “universal” laws of class, economic relations, surplus value, etc. Racism, and the countering affirmation of black personhood, are central and non-epiphenomenal features of the Caribbean reality which must themselves be “scientifically” studied.²⁰

This is absolutely correct. And yet, if we are to study race and racism scientifically, then we must ask how it is that they came to be and what sustains them. The central insight of Marxism for this purpose is that human life is a human product. And so we might ask, what is the character of human production and reproduction of their social reality, and how does that character appear at this particular historical moment? How might we consciously direct our productive capacities in such a way as to produce the abolition of racism? Now we are applying the materialist conception of history. As I have written elsewhere,

[T]here can be no race concept, no racial oppression, no racial categories, no racialized human beings, no racial passing, and no whiteness, without the existence of the human beings whose social life includes these phenomena and who must produce and reproduce the material conditions of their existence. Capitalism mediates our lives all the way down to the production and reproduction of our bodies, which we must keep alive either by owning capital or by serving it. As significant

19. Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, MECW 3:182.

20. Mills 1990, 32.

as racial ideology is, it has not broken free of the same material necessity that constrains all human life.²¹

Ben Pitcher, in his 2012 “Race and Capitalism Redux,” offers another kind of objection to the assignment of causal primacy to capitalism in producing race and racism. Pitcher writes,

We can point to historical moments—such as in Jim Crow America—when a raciological division of labour gave the appearance of being (and for all intents and purposes might as well have been) integral to the prevailing mode of capitalist production. Yet this correspondence should not blind us to the fact that racism did not derive from capitalism itself but rather from the social, cultural and institutional conditions of post-slavery, pre-civil rights America. Those social, cultural and institutional conditions were of course formed in and through capitalism, as well as being structured by it, but they are not assimilable to a definition of capitalism itself.²²

Of course, the Marxist position is not that race is caused by the *definition* of capitalism, much less by “capitalism itself,” if that is supposed to denote something abstractly separable from the social, cultural, and institutional conditions that it gives rise to and which, in turn, condition it. Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*, “[W]hen we speak of production, we always have in mind production at a definite stage of social development, production by social individuals.”²³ The Marxist position is precisely the one that Pitcher himself presents as plausible: that racism is produced and mediated by social structures which are themselves “formed in and through” capitalism, and structured by it, as it appears concretely, as the dominant economic mode through which human beings produce and reproduce their means of subsistence and, in turn, their forms of life.²⁴

ABOLISHING CAPITALISM (AND SEXISM AND RACISM?)

If racism and sexism were epiphenomenal to capitalism, then it might seem to follow that the overthrow of capitalism would necessarily and automatically result in the immediate vanquishment of racism and sexism. But, as both Marxism and its critics agree, the causal relationship between class-based exploitation and identity-based oppression is not so one-sided or simple. Why, then, do Marxists place such

21. Wills, unpublished manuscript.

22. Pitcher 2012, 7.

23. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 28:23.

24. As Himani Bannerji writes in her 2005 “Building from Marx,” “The actual realization process of capital cannot be outside a given social and cultural form or mode. There is no capital that is a universal abstraction. Capital is always a practice, a determinate set of social relations and a cultural one at that.”

special focus on *class* in crafting their antiracist and antisexist strategies, if it is not because they are class reductionists?

The answer to this question is that a world without identity-based oppression (obviously) does not yet exist and would have to be *made*. To make it will require, among other things, a massive redirection and mobilization of material resources, much of it utilized and distributed in ways that will not turn capitalists any profits and, indeed, will eat into their margins. It will require redirecting and reorganizing our mode of production in such a way that its direct aim is the development of human agency, creative potential, and fellowship. These kinds of monumental-scale interventions into our social relations, which an effective anti-racism and antisexism would require, are simply incompatible with capitalism's exaltation of the pursuit of private accumulation, of profit, as the highest human value. Capitalism must be overcome.

An immediately post-revolutionary socialist society, one in which workers direct the means of production, would likely continue to be marked by all manner of racist and sexist attitudes, beliefs, and practice. It is fanciful to assume otherwise. As Marx forewarns us in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*,

What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has developed on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally, and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges.²⁵

The achievement of such a revolutionary society, with respect to antiracism and antisexism, is not that it could cause oppression to blink suddenly and automatically out of existence, but rather that it could create the conditions within which antiracist and antisexist work might far more effectively be done. It might after all, fail. But its chances of success are much greater in a setting in which it is the masses, who actually produce society, that consciously decide together what kind of society they will produce.

But before such a historical moment is even dimly possible, struggles against oppression are urgent today, and indeed, a kind of transcendental argument can be made regarding the conditions of possibility of such a revolutionary movement. The working class simply *will* not find itself in a position to make a socialist revolution unless it successfully overcomes much of the hatreds and oppressions that divide it against itself. And so, one cannot simply "focus on class" or "focus on economics" and imagine that the rest will simply resolve itself. We must intervene in the whole complex of conditions within which human beings produce and reproduce their lives: this includes both material and ideal aspects of Being.

I have focused here on the causal relationships between capitalism and racism and between capitalism and sexism, but of course a complete accounting of the relationship between class-based exploitation and identity-based oppressions must

25. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, MECW 24:85.

also offer an analysis of interactions between racism and sexism, of specific phenomena such as misogynoir, and of the many richly various aspects of social identity such as sexuality, ethnicity, and so on.²⁶ Race, sex, and class are distinguished abstractly as objects of analysis; yet, human beings are never only raced, or sexed, or classed, but are all three simultaneously and much else besides. What unifies this multiplicity into a single, essential human nature is that as social beings, all that human beings are is made by us, and could be made otherwise. *This*, its emphasis on how and under what conditions we make our lives, is Marxism's central insight and key contribution to struggles against oppression.

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26. "Misogynoir"—a term to denote the specific phenomenon of anti-Black misogyny—was coined by Moya Bailey in her 2010, "They Aren't Talking about Me."

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