

What Is Marxist-Feminism?

written by Frieda Afary | August 11, 2025



Nancy Holmstrom is a professor of philosophy emeritus at Rutgers University. She represents a unique blend of philosophical rigor and activism rooted in genuine concern for women and LGBTQ people suffering from the ills of capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and homophobia in the Global North and the Global South.

In this collection of essays, she offers her key contributions to feminist theory over a lifetime. While *The Socialist Feminist Project* (2002), a collection of essays she edited was broader in scope, this book identifies what she thinks distinguishes Marxist-Feminism from Socialist Feminism. Marxist-Feminism, the perspective that she identifies with, she defines as the centrality of the mode of production: “The idea that the capitalist mode of production sets the terms, if you will, of degrees of freedom and unfreedom, again in historically particular ways different from other modes of production.” The capitalist mode of production is seen as “foundational but not determinative” (3).

This view can be better understood by exploring Holmstrom’s articulation of the Marxian concept of human nature. It is also especially relevant to the current debates on queer theory and identity, which challenge an essentialist and unchanging concept of human nature.

Holmstrom’s essay “A Marxist Theory of Women’s Nature” argues that according to Karl Marx’s philosophy, human needs and capacities are expressed, shaped, and created through labor (an activity of satisfying needs). Thus, it is labor, not biological determinism, that is the key to an explanation of social life and social change. She demonstrates that for Marx, biological differences between men and women cannot explain or justify any talk of distinct natures, because his effort is aimed at examining the nature of people as social groups not as biological groups. Thus, “Marx is denying that there is a human nature in the traditional, transhistorical sense. On his view, however, there are historically specific forms of human nature ... specific to feudalism, to capitalism, to socialism and so on” (232).

Furthermore, Holmstrom adds that human nature, and even biological nature, can change through sociohistorical factors and through evolution. Thus, she states that “in Marx’s view, the contrast of the social with the natural and unchanging is particularly inappropriate to human beings since they are by nature social beings with a history” (233). While biological differences cannot be discounted, it is the social factors not the biological ones that are the primary determinants. Hence, from a Marxist standpoint, psychological differences between women and men would be related to the sorts of labor that they do and the resulting social relations. “[T]he Marxist view is not that there is a direct causal connection between the type of labor people do and their personality structure. Rather, the type of labor people do puts them into certain social relations and those relations are institutionalized into sets of practices, institutions, cultural agencies and so on” (237).

It is not primarily biology, but mostly the oppressive social, economic, and historical conditions that determine the sexual/social division of labor. Thus, even women who have non-traditional jobs and

do not have a family to take care of are still influenced by dominant patriarchal, social, and cultural institutions.

Holmstrom emphasizes that while Marx did not have an essentialist view of human nature, he did believe that humans have a unique potential for free and conscious activity that can only be fully developed in a socialist society free of alienated labor. On this basis, she argues that while there will always be some differences in men's and in women's experiences of themselves as physical beings, the meaning of those experiences will be different depending on how society develops. Furthermore, in a society not based on alienated labor, "the sexual and reproductive choices women make would not have the kind of profound social consequences for women as opposed to men that they do now" (246).

Holmstrom's articulation of a non-essentialist concept of human nature, further explained in an essay entitled "Humankind(s)," can also be illuminating for those engaged in debates on trans identity. While she does not agree with "formulations of the sex/gender distinction that present the biological as an underlying substratum untouched by society, and gender as pure culture, laid on top of an inert biology," she also does not agree with the view that collapses the sex/gender distinction and claims that gender is merely a performance (257). She helps us see that while there are some sex-based differences that can never be eliminated, there is no essential human nature rooted in biology. Current entrenched views about masculinity and femininity are rather deeply rooted in a set of economic, historical, and social relations in our capitalist epoch.

Although women and LGBTQ people in various parts of the world have made great gains, large numbers of the general public in the United States and globally still cling to traditional gender norms. The fact that authoritarian and fascist rulers are currently using transphobia as one of the elements in their effort to gain mass support, means that misogynistic, patriarchal, and homophobic views are still very much entrenched in all societies. Holmstrom's work shows that overcoming these views cannot be done through simply cultural and performative work but needs deep economic, social, and political transformations. In this regard she shares some of the views of Rosemary Hennessy (2000), an important queer theorist.

In an essay entitled "Sex, Work and Capitalism," Holmstrom offers a unique perspective on the current feminist debates on sex work. Among socialist feminists, there are differences about what it means to have a queer and sex-positive movement that opposes all forms of sexual exploitation, all oppressive gender norms, and all forms of instrumentalization of ourselves or others (Goldberg, 2021; Srinivasan, 2021). Some advocate the full legalization and normalization of sex work and argue that it can be "creative" or "satisfying" (Smith and Mac, 2020). Others, who also defend the rights of sex workers and their efforts to self-organize for safety, view sex work as a practice of commodification and instrumentalization of one's body and feelings. While they support the decriminalization of sex workers, they emphasize that sex work in addition to being exploitative and abusive, does terrible long-term physical and psychological damage to those who perform it, whether they are forced to do it or do it "voluntarily." As a proponent of the latter view, Holmstrom writes: "Thus selling sexual services is not like selling other services. Selling intimate bodily experiences is a kind of ultimate alienation" (37).

The challenge for socialist feminists therefore is how to support women working as prostitutes without giving up our critique of the work and the institution of prostitution. But support for the women in the business must always be conjoined with struggles to change the political economic conditions that push so many into it. We should fight for jobs with living wages, affordable housing and childcare, substance abuse programs, help with immigration problems, and whatever else sex workers say they need (39).

I agree with this view and would argue that rather than channeling our organizing efforts into legalizing sex work, it would be best if we helped expand the message of the #MeToo Movement to challenge the normalization of sexual abuse and assault in all spheres of life (Boussedra, 2017; Mock, 2014). The facts indicate that extending the legalization of sex work to pimps and clients facilitates further exploitation of women and children and increases sex trafficking (Harvard Law School, 2014). Adding sex work to the list of normal service sector jobs also means that unemployed women who receive assistance from the state would not be able to refuse sex work as employment. Normalizing sex work means that more and more young women, men, and trans people would consider sex work as a full-time or side job to make money.

Holmstrom has also contributed to feminist debates on Social Reproduction Theory. She believes that while women's oppression did not start with capitalism, women's oppression under capitalism cannot be explained simply on the basis of domestic and reproductive labor. Domestic labor, she argues, can be phased out under capitalism in order to further facilitate capitalist exploitation of labor. However, capitalist alienated labor and its separation of mind and body, affects our psyche and diminishes freedom in all spheres of life (281).

What enables Holmstrom to offer deep illumination on current socialist feminist debates and genuine solidarity with oppressed people is her socialist humanist approach. Unlike post-structuralist thinkers who define freedom as the struggle for power and domination, she views freedom as human flourishing or self-realization rooted in solidarity and rationality. Her concept of rationality is not about capitalist calculation and maximization of utility. It is about cooperation and collective struggle rooted in human control over the means and process of our labor. That labor is what Marx called the human potential for free and conscious activity, not mechanical and mindless work. Free and conscious activity is also about the protection of nature/the environment and the creation of a sustainable future.

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