

Here we are presenting Frank Brenner's 1998 article, "Gender and materialism", which the WSWS editorial board refused to run. We are also presenting three letters about that article - two from WSWS arts editor David Walsh to Frank Brenner and a reply from Brenner. As is evident from Walsh's letters, his position on the article undergoes a dramatic shift: the "very positive" response he had to the article in the first letter becomes extremely critical in the second. Clearly in the second letter it isn't Walsh so much as North (and Barry Grey) who are speaking. It is North who drew attention to this material in his polemic against us, specifically the section "The origins of the campaign for 'Utopia'" (69-76). North referred to this material in a provocative and dishonest matter. He created the impression that Brenner had written a wildly speculative and outrageous piece of work, but he posted none of the material that he was referring to. Readers are now in a position to judge for themselves whether Brenner's writing matches the picture North presents of it.

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Gender and materialism

or, why men and women are from the same planet

by Frank Brenner

What does it mean to be a man or a woman?

Though one might think that the answer is obvious, for a great many people these days it isn't. The nature of sexual identity (or gender roles) has become a subject of considerable debate, as much in scholarly journals as on sensationalist talk shows. An indication of the interest - and confusion - this issue is generating comes from the field of pop psychology, specifically a book called *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, which has sold a staggering 6 million copies since it was first published in 1992.

Its author, John Gray, has spun the success of his book into a veritable industry, producing six more volumes on the same theme, videotapes, audio cassettes, CD-ROMS, seminars and even a Broadway stage production. Gray is a longtime disciple of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi of transcendental meditation fame. Though sporting a Ph.D. (picked up via correspondence courses from a California diploma mill) to give himself a veneer of scientific credibility, Gray is simply one more in a long line of pop psychology gurus, passing off banalities as deep truths. But what can't be so easily dismissed is the fact that he has managed to tap into the very real concerns of a mass audience.

It isn't hard to figure out where those concerns are coming from. In the past, gender roles were rooted in the traditional family structure: men did the bread-winning and women did the house-keeping and raising of the children. But for much of this century that structure has been buckling under economic and social pressures, so that by now signs of the breakdown of the family are everywhere - in the soaring rates of divorce and numbers of single-parent families, in the decline of marriage as a legal and religious institution, and in the exposure of wife and child abuse as the dark truth that all too frequently lies beneath the mythology of 'family values'. Under these conditions, it becomes increasingly difficult to know what it means to be a father or mother, husband or wife. And, as those roles are cast into doubt, so is the very nature of one's identity as a man or a woman.

Difficult problems invite simplistic solutions, especially when there is a buck to be made doing so. Gray's answer is simplicity itself: the problem with most relationships is that men and women are so unlike each other that it is as if they come from different worlds. "Not only do men and women communicate differently," he states, "but they think, feel, perceive, react, respond, love, need, and appreciate differently. They almost seem to be from different planets, speaking different languages and needing different nourishment."¹ Hence the metaphor of Mars and Venus, these particular planets being chosen because of their obvious mythological connotation, i.e. the god of war to epitomize men and the goddess of love to epitomize women. Gray's imagery may be other-worldly but his ideas are utterly mundane: he has simply recycled the conventional belief that men and women are different kinds of creatures. Still, it says something about the current state of sexual relationships that a book can become a huge bestseller by pushing the idea that men and women are so totally alien to each other that they might as well come from different planets.

As for Gray's message, the basic dishonesty of his approach to relationships is readily apparent. His Mars and Venus couples live in a make-believe universe where, for one thing, children don't seem to exist, not rating so much as a mention in his book, and, for another, "the problem in relationships today is not money, although sometimes we think it is"² (!).

The big issue, according to Gray, is "improving communication" - pop psychology's favorite panacea - and the whole point of the book is to offer up practical tips for doing so. But even the term "communication" is used in a dishonest way. The word means 'to make common', but Gray's basic premise is that men and women have nothing in common. Perhaps the most graphic illustration of this point is Gray's inclusion of a 'dictionary' so that 'Martians' can translate what 'Vesuvians' are saying and vice versa: there is no common ground between the sexes even in language. Thus, the very notion of communication gets turned inside out: the point isn't to understand one's spouse (since presumably that is impossible) but rather to *manipulate* him or her more effectively. And so there are chapters on how to avoid arguments (that is, as opposed to working through the underlying problems), on how to 'motivate' and 'score points' with one's spouse, etc.

Love is a compassionless thing on Mars and Venus. If you turn to a lover for consolation, you are burdening him or her with 'negative feelings'; if you have anything critical to say, you are being 'judgmental'; and if you expect any change from your lover (or, indeed, from yourself), you are being 'demanding'. This is a conception of love very much of this planet, or rather of the capitalist social system which presently prevails on it - a love in which emotional 'costs' are kept to a minimum, which is to say

¹ John Gray *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (New York: 1992), p. 5.

² John Gray *Men, Women and Relationships* (New York: 1996), p. xiv.

a love that is ultimately loveless. And though Gray may claim that money isn't a big problem, his message is steeped in the language of money: men and women 'shop around' for a 'partner', a man is always 'looking for the bottom line', you need a 'job description' for relationships so that you can 'get what you want' out of them. As Marx pointed out long ago, in capitalism every relationship, even the most intimate, gets turned into a "cash nexus."

Gray and his Mars/Venus road show are a passing fad, but they are also a symptom of something much more substantial: as Gray repeatedly assures his readers, his ideas are nothing more than 'common sense'. So, in order to arrive at a materialist understanding of gender, a good starting point would be a critical examination of this common sense view.

The gist of that view is that we are born male or female, i.e. that sexual identity is biologically determined. In effect, two different facts are being linked here: first, that men and women have different anatomies and second, that men and women behave differently. The basic assumption is that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between these two facts - different biology makes for different behavior.

Is that assumption valid? Before we can answer that, however, we first have to be clear about the facts we are considering: though we all know what it means to be masculine or feminine in a biological sense, what about behavior? Here we are really dealing with gender roles - i.e. what it means to 'act like a man' or to be 'womanly'. If we look at those roles and determine the normal characteristics associated with them, a common denominator emerges in each case. As one writer has summed it up rather concisely: "A 'normal' man is active, aggressive, independent, exclusively heterosexual, more or less restricting his heterosexuality to the active thrusting of his penis into the passive receptive vagina; a 'normal' woman is passive, submissive, dependent, exclusively heterosexual, more or less restricting her heterosexuality to the passive reception of the actively thrusting penis."³ So, as regards to our behavior (i.e. how we think, feel, love, etc.), being masculine essentially means being active and being feminine essentially means being passive. (One should add that it may sometimes take a lot of activity to fulfill a passive role: for example, a woman can go to great effort to seduce a man, but her main objective in doing so can still be a passive one, i.e. to be loved.)

It is evident that these descriptions are very broad generalizations and that there are many individuals whose behavior, to one extent or another, doesn't conform to them. But we would be making a big mistake if we dismissed the significance of gender roles on this account. Because they express what is considered normal in our society, gender roles are crucial - even decisive - in determining how children are raised, and they go on

³ Gad Horowitz *Repression: Basic and surplus repression in psychoanalytic theory* (Toronto: 1977), p. 87.

having a profound effect on us as adults, often without our realizing it. In the world as it is, it is indeed the case that most men are mostly active and most women are mostly passive.

The key question is why, and this brings us back to the common sense assumption that men and women are naturally this way. Nor does there seem to be much room for argument with this assumption, given the obvious fact that the penis is active and the vagina is passive in 'normal' heterosexual sex. But the closer we look at this assumption, the more it reveals itself to be an optical illusion in which a socially-determined relationship has become so deeply embedded in social consciousness that it has taken on the appearance of being natural.

Let us begin by looking at nature. If male sexuality is naturally active and female sexuality naturally passive, then this should be readily apparent in the behavior of other species. But no such clear-cut pattern emerges from the biological record: while it is true that in many species the males are active - which is to say, aggressive - in their sexual behavior, there are also no small number of species where the females are the aggressors.

Moreover, as we approach the human branch of the evolutionary tree, sexual behavior becomes far less the rigid instinctive pattern tied to reproduction that it is in most species. In the higher primates, sexuality blossoms into a variety of behaviors whose only apparent motive seems to be pleasure. These include: male and female homosexuality, mutual masturbation, females mounting males as well as males mounting females - in other words, bodies combining in ways in which active and passive roles seem to be interchangeable between the sexes. And this is clearly a development that serves an important evolutionary purpose since sex for pleasure strengthens social bonds and thereby contributes to group cohesion among primates.⁴

When we come to our own species, we find an even more pronounced tendency to engage in sex for pleasure rather than reproduction. Indeed, it is one of the distinctive characteristics of human sexuality that we do not go into 'heat' like other species, which means that we are sexually receptive even in those periods when we are not capable of conceiving. But if sex for pleasure is a natural human inclination, then the gender roles of active males and passive females are an unnatural restriction on that inclination. This is because if all that were determining our sexual behavior were our desire for pleasure, then we would expect both sexes to be active *and* passive, i.e. masculine *and* feminine. And, as we will see shortly, this is just how human beings do behave in the most instinctive stage of life - childhood.

⁴ See Jane B. Lancaster, "Sex and Gender in Evolutionary Perspective" in *Human Sexuality: A Comparative and Developmental Perspective* (Berkeley: 1979), pp. 51-80.

Nor is there much more merit to the other argument that is usually made in support of the common sense view - that women's roles as mothers tend to make them passive whereas men's roles in work-related activities such as hunting tend to make them active. To begin with, mothering behavior isn't automatically (i.e. instinctively) a function of being female: in nature there are many species in which males and females are jointly responsible for nurturing the young and there are even some where it is the sole responsibility of the male. Furthermore, there is nothing inherently passive about being a mother; on the contrary, in relation to her child, a mother behaves in an entirely active way. And as to work, the anthropological record shows that in matriarchal societies, women often did a greater share of the productive labor than men.

Thus, the common sense view is based on the false assumption that because we are born with male or female bodies, we are also born with male or female *minds*. Nothing contradicts this assumption more clearly than childhood. One of the most striking features of the earliest years of life - up to the ages of 2 or 3 - is how indistinguishable the sexes are from each other. We can't tell little boys apart from little girls by anything in their behavior; rather we do so by such things as first names, clothing, hair cuts - i.e. all the outward signs of gender roles that are imposed on children by adults. This is why Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, concluded that, in a psychological sense, children are innately bisexual, that is, they combine the active and passive characteristics associated with both genders. This conception finds further confirmation in the fact that children of both sexes develop similar emotional attachments: the first love of a girl, like that of a boy, is for its mother, but it is also the case that boys, as well as girls, can develop passionate feelings for their fathers.

(In speaking of the love felt by children, it needs to be pointed out that prior to Freud, such feelings were dismissed as inconsequential because children were assumed to be asexual until puberty. This belief, bred of ignorance and religious backwardness, was contradicted in practice by parents and teachers who routinely disciplined children for engaging in 'naughty' behavior such as masturbation. Though sexuality takes different forms in children than in adults, children are sexual beings and their love for their parents is a sexual passion.)

Freud is out of favor these days. He is frequently derided as an impostor by academics, mass media organs like *Time* magazine proclaim that his ideas are dead, and there is even a website on the Internet devoted, as the title succinctly puts it, to 'Burying Freud'. To a Marxist, much of this anti-Freud ballyhoo has a familiar ring: many of the same forces that want to bury Freud have been trying to bury Marx for a very long time. While Marxists are not uncritical of Freud, we recognize that the current campaign against psychoanalysis is part of a wider onslaught against reason within bourgeois society. Freud uncovered uncomfortable truths about human psychology, and in that respect his work is an invaluable contribution to materialism. The obscuring of those

truths, aided considerably by the current campaign against Freud, leaves the field of psychology wide open to panacea-peddlers like Gray.

Freud's ideas are essential to a materialist understanding of gender, providing an account in terms of individual psychology that complements the standpoint of historical materialism. The theory of the inherent bisexuality of human beings is a good example of this. Marxism teaches us that our species made itself human through labor, which means that by changing external nature our hominid ancestors changed their internal nature as well. Our instincts, according to the anthropologist Gordon Childe, became "very generalized tendencies" rather than the rigid behavior patterns of other species.⁵ In effect, Freud's theory showed how this process worked itself out with regard to one instinct - sexuality. In becoming more generalized, it no longer served an exclusively reproductive function with its rigid counterposing of sexual roles. Instead, a *humanized* sexuality became more malleable and polymorphous in its manifestations. The natural sexual impulse of humans, according to Freud, is to choose "an object [i.e. of sexual desire] independently of its sex," or, what amounts to the same thing, "freedom to range equally over male and female objects," and this is just what one finds "in childhood, in primitive states of society and early periods of history."⁶

Freud's theory opens up a new perspective on the question of gender. If we are bisexual at birth, then it must be society which makes us into males and females. Or, more precisely, it is society which is *primarily* responsible for making us that way. In rejecting the common sense view, it would be a mistake to swing completely the other way and deny biology any role whatsoever in gender. The maturing of the human body and the shifting of sexual energy (or libido) to the genitals does provide a biological impetus towards activity for males and passivity for females. But an impetus is not an imperative. One can just as easily say that biology, by making it possible for humans to sexually gratify themselves using parts of the body such as the clitoris, the mouth and the anus, provides an impetus for forms of sexuality other than genital intercourse. And, of course, in these other forms - foreplay, oral or anal sex - active and passive roles are determined not by anatomy but by desire. It is society, not biology, which designates a particular form of sexuality (and the gender roles related to it) as a 'norm' while subjecting other forms to repression.

(The poets, it is worth pointing out, have long understood this. Blake, following Milton, believed that 'normal' sex was a degradation of human sexuality to a localized false desire, and that originally sexuality had been the complete merging of two bodies.⁷

⁵ V. Gordon Childe *Man makes himself* (New York: 1951), p. 29.

⁶ Sigmund Freud *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (London: [1905], 1977), p. 57, n.

⁷ See, for instance, Blake's *Jerusalem*: "Embraces are Cominglings: from the Head even to the Feet" (Plate 69: line 43) in *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (New York:

Blake also believed that humanity was originally bisexual, an idea that goes back at least as far as Plato's *Symposium*. In this, as in many other respects, psychoanalysis proves to be a scientific verification of poetic truth.)

Thus, it is social life that holds the key to understanding gender roles. Here again, there is an important convergence between the Marxist and the psychoanalytic standpoints: in effect, the first gives us the answer to why this happens and the second the answer to how.

In one of the classic works of Marxism, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Friedrich Engels provided the first materialist explanation of the historical evolution of the family. The key nodal point in that history was the transition from matriarchy (i.e. families led by mothers) to patriarchy (i.e. families led by fathers). The overthrow of matriarchy, writes Engels, "was the *world-historic defeat of the female sex*. The man seized the reins in the house, ... the woman was degraded, enthralled, the slave of the man's lust, a mere instrument for breeding children. This lowered position of women, especially manifest among the Greeks of the Heroic and still more of the Classical Age, has become gradually embellished and dissembled and, in part, clothed in a milder form, but by no means abolished."⁸

If being treated as a "slave of the man's lust" and "a mere instrument for breeding children" constituted a terrible degradation of women that was only made possible by a "world-historic defeat of the female sex", then it is evident that, as far as gender roles were concerned, the emergence of patriarchy represented a massive step backwards, a reversion from a humanized sexuality to an inhuman one. And this degradation of women is not merely ancient history but a condition which persists to this day, despite a considerable number of 'embellishments' in recent years. The gender roles of active men and passive women are, therefore, the creations of a society built on oppression and domination. This imposing of a dehumanized role on women, whose inevitable corollary was the imposing of a dehumanized role on men, became the prototype for the more generalized relations of oppression - the economic exploitation of one human being by another - that are at the very base of class society.

This is the why of gender roles, but we still need to know the how, i.e. the actual ways in which these roles are imposed on individuals. In the case of a woman, for instance, if her 'femininity' is to serve its social function, then obviously it cannot be suddenly imposed on her at puberty or when she is about to start her own family. To be effective, gender roles have to be bred into children from the earliest years of life. This applies as much to men as to women: the masculine role of being 'head of the family' is no more

[1804], 1970), p. 221.

⁸ Friedrich Engels *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Moscow: [1884], 1977), p. 57.

natural to boys than the feminine role of being a baby-making machine is natural to girls.

To understand how this happens, it is useful to quote here from what is probably the most widely read parenting book of the century, *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care*. Around the ages of 2 ½ or 3, according to Spock, children tend to develop fears regarding injuries, both real and imagined. "They even get mixed up and worried about the natural differences between boys and girls. If a boy around the age of 3 sees a girl undressed, it may strike him as queer that she hasn't got a penis like his. He's apt to say, 'Where is her wee wee?' If he doesn't receive a satisfactory answer right away, he may jump to the conclusion that some accident has happened to her. Next comes the anxious thought, 'That might happen to me, too.' The same misunderstanding may worry the little girl when she first realizes that boys are made differently. First she asks, 'What's that?' Then she wants to know anxiously, 'Why don't I have one? What happened to it?' That's the way a 3-year-old's mind works. They may be so upset right away that they're afraid to question their parents."⁹

If we don't give in to the common prejudice of dismissing this kind of behavior as mere 'childishness' - which is to say, if we stop looking at it as an adult and try to consider it from the child's point of the view - then what emerges from this account is a troubling picture of children beset by anxieties about their genitals. And it is has to be emphasized that this is not some abnormality but rather how children typically behave in our society.

We are dealing here with one of those 'ordinary' aspects of life that are extraordinary in their implications. Freud, reasonably enough, termed this kind of behavior castration anxiety. But whereas Spock (despite being a Freudian himself) offers no explanation for it except to say that this is "the way a 3-year-old's mind works," Freud looked for its causes in the life-experience of the child. What he uncovered, primarily by working through the dreams and unconscious associations of his adult patients, was that children undergo a psychological trauma at this point in their lives, whose source lies in the intense feelings they have for their parents. It is a trauma set off by fear of the father, whom the child sees as a terrifying rival for the love of its mother (the famous 'Oedipus complex'), and the child interprets this fear in the most visceral terms, i.e. as a fear of castration.

It would be tempting simply to ascribe this trauma to a child's overwrought imagination, and it is certainly true that fantasy plays an important part in the process. But though this fear seems bizarre to us as adults, this isn't just a matter of children making things up. When we consider how common it is for parents to admonish, threaten or actually hit their children whenever they touch their genitals (especially in

⁹ Benjamin Spock and Michael B. Rothenberg *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care*, 6th edition, New York: 1992, p. 499.

public) or engage in sexual play (such as playing ‘house’ or ‘doctor’) with other children, then it becomes evident that the child has good grounds in experience for its fear. And when we add to this the father’s role as authority figure and how, in most families, ‘wait til daddy gets home’ is still the ultimate threat (even if the father’s actual behavior is benign), then it becomes evident how castration fear becomes associated in the child’s mind with the father. The child is traumatized by that fear into abandoning its rivalry with its father, resolving its crisis in one of two ways: either by emulating the father (i.e. by becoming masculine) or by trying to become the father’s lover (i.e. by emulating the mother and becoming feminine).

In the psychoanalytic view, then, growing up is an experience fraught with anxiety and terror. Though this jars with idealized notions of childhood and family life, it is what we would expect to find from a materialist standpoint given the way the world is. Children are deeply impressionable and wholly dependent on parents who are themselves constantly being brutalized by life in capitalist society. The family is not a refuge from the pressures of the outside world that bourgeois ideology makes it out to be, but rather the principal means by which those pressures are brought to bear on the child.

This is certainly evident in the repression of childhood sexuality. Disciplining children for behaving in a sexual way has nothing to do with the needs of the child or the requirements of growing up and becoming part of human society as such; on the contrary, an activity such as sex play is an obvious catalyst for developing new social relationships outside of the family. But such repression does respond to the needs of *capitalist* society because children have to be raised in a way that prepares them for a lifetime of toil, i.e. a lifetime in which their bodies will be treated as profit-producing machines. Thus, the child’s natural human inclination to treat its body as a source of pleasure has to be curbed so that in later life the sexual instinct can be kept to the bare minimum of genital intercourse for the purpose of procreation - which is to say, the creation of a new generation of toilers. The imposition of gender roles serves the same basic social objective since the curbing of sexuality could never be effective if children were allowed to pursue their inherently bisexual inclinations. (Needless to say, this isn’t what consciously motivates parents: for the most part, they simply want their children to behave ‘properly’. But it is through the assumptions as to what is ‘proper’ or ‘good’ behavior that the requirements of class society assert themselves.)

Many children go through the process of becoming masculine and feminine ‘imperfectly’. If there is too much or too little fear, if it is imposed too severely or too inconsistently, then the result will be a personality that fails, in some significant way, to conform to the ‘norm’ of active males and passive females. But from a materialist standpoint, the child who ‘succeeds’ in conforming to the norm is as problematic as the child who ‘fails’ because the norm itself is problematic, imposed by class society rather than derived from human nature. By the same token, heterosexuality is no more natural than homosexuality because, objectively, the one is as much a *constriction* of the

inherent bisexuality of human beings as the other. Thus, a materialist account of gender shows that in becoming masculine or feminine, we repress a part of our humanity.

Predictably, it is women who sacrifice the most. To begin with, it is simply much harder to be passive than to be active, whether in sex or in the many other aspects of life for which one's sexual behavior sets a pattern. The docility which is bred into women to make them put up with a lifetime of domestic drudgery also makes them prey to physical and emotional abuse at home and sexual harassment at work, to say nothing of the horrors of rape and prostitution or of a culture infested with the misogynist images of pornography.

But being female comes with other costs. If we go back to the childhood trauma discussed earlier, the psychological transition a girl is expected to make is more difficult than that of a boy. In his case, having been forced to abandon his sexual love for his mother, he is at least allowed to shift his feelings to someone like her, i.e. to another woman (often, at first, a sister and later a girlfriend). In the girl's case, however, the shift she is expected to make is much more radical, from her mother to a completely different kind of person, i.e. a man. Because this is so much harder to do, it takes so much longer to get through. Thus, a girl's attachment to her father typically lasts far longer than a boy's attachment to his mother, often extending past puberty and well into adult life. Or, to put this in vernacular terms, a woman often stays a 'daddy's girl' for much longer than a man is a 'momma's boy', and because of this she is held back - stunted, as it were - when it comes to fully developing new sexual and emotional relationships with other men or women.

But men, too, are stunted. This is particularly evident in what Freud once called the tendency to "debasement" in love. A man often emerges from childhood with an unconscious fixation on his mother, so that he tends to fall in love with women whom he unconsciously associates with her. But this association carries with it an intense sexual repression, the result of the castration anxiety which caused him to abandon his sexual desire for his mother as a child. So, while he may adore and worship the woman he has fallen in love with, he may also feel little, if any, sexual desire for her. The same emotional logic will make him tend to regard any woman who does arouse him sexually as degraded and debased because he has to rule out any association between her and the unconscious image of the mother he venerates.¹⁰ Thus, the two dimensions of love - emotional affection and sexual desire - become dissociated from each other. A man finds himself incapable of attaining sexual gratification with the woman he loves and incapable of loving the woman who sexually gratifies him. He treats the one as a 'madonna' and the other as a 'whore', and his relationship with both becomes a misery to himself as well as to them.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love" [1912] in *On Sexuality* (London: 1977), pp. 243-60.

Engels, it should be noted, called the fusion of tenderness and sexuality in individual sex love “the greatest moral advance” that resulted from the historical development of monogamous relationships between men and women.¹¹ Freud’s uncovering of the tendency to debasement in love shows how this advance is constantly undermined in capitalist society. Like the constriction of sexuality, the debasement of love is an emotional hallmark of an inhuman society.

But in tallying up the psychic injuries inflicted on men, some mention should be made of the extreme repression attached to male homosexuality in capitalist society. A criminal offense in most countries, homosexuality is still socially stigmatized and hounded by religious bigotry even where it is no longer legally outlawed. But a less egregious, though more pervasive, indication of this repression is the fact that men who have been lifelong friends would never think of kissing or holding hands or embracing, i.e. all the typical human gestures of intimacy that two people who care for each other would make as a matter of course in any other social relationship. (Of course there are some cultures where a kiss on the cheek is a common form of greeting, but this is a ritualized gesture which involves no more intimacy than a handshake.) This aspect of male (and, to a lesser extent, female) upbringing fits well with the individualist ideology and alienated nature of social life under capitalism. Intimacy is seen as weakness - i.e. as effeminate - in a world where you can trust no one but yourself. Indeed, there has probably never been a society which has subjected friendship and the natural sociability of human beings to as much repression as capitalism has.

A materialist consideration of gender takes us to the very root of people’s lives. As with every other important aspect of social life, the more deeply we probe it, the more the need for revolutionary change becomes evident. Gender roles can only be gotten rid of, and the relations between men and women placed on a new basis, by a complete transformation of the family so that children are raised in a way that nurtures the development of their humanity, rather than constricting and repressing it. This is not to dismiss the efforts of individuals in this society to become conscious of these problems and address them in their own lives. It is simply to insist that, within capitalism, it will never be possible for more than a handful of people to deal with these issues in any meaningful way, and even in their cases, whatever gains they make in leading a more fulfilling personal life will be constantly undermined and blighted by the oppressiveness of the world around them.

The revolutionary implications of gender, however, have received little, if any, attention in the reams of articles, books and lectures that have come out on the subject in recent years. Virtually all of the academic ‘discourses’ on gender are mired in the metaphysics of deconstruction, endlessly spinning out abstruse categories devoid of any connection

¹¹ Engels, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

with reality. Though a proper consideration of this material would require an article on its own, a few general points are worth making here. Within academia, two camps can be discerned on this issue. The first holds to the view that gender is socially determined or ‘constructed’. Freud usually has a prominent place in such discussions, but almost always it isn’t psychoanalytic theory as such that is being invoked but rather its highly idealist revision by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. A crucial role here belongs to Stalinist philosopher Louis Althusser: it was he who married Lacan’s psychology to his own political ideology and opened up a major audience for these ideas within radical and academic circles, first in Europe and later in North America.¹² What emerged, not surprisingly, was a deeply reactionary perspective, one in which the basic truth uncovered by Freud that gender roles are the products of social upbringing was twisted into a rigid doctrine of social determinism. According to this view, it isn’t that we are merely wounded by our upbringing in class society; rather, we *are* that wound, we *are* the gender roles imposed on us, we *are* the ideology that ‘constructs’ us, and there is nothing else to us except that. Needless to say, if this true, then bourgeois ideology is omnipotent and any hope for revolutionary change - indeed, for change of any kind - is a mere pipe-dream.

It isn’t hard to see the appeal this kind of outlook would have had to intellectuals demoralized by the defeats of the revolutionary upsurge of the late Sixties. But it also isn’t hard to see that eventually there would be some dissatisfaction with the sheer remorselessness of this perspective and attempts made to find an alternative conception of gender that allowed for some glimmer of hope. And, indeed by the mid-Seventies, such alternatives did emerge, though not in the direction of materialism. Quite the contrary, the tendency was to move back to a biological determinism that pre-dated Freud. This new camp came primarily from the feminist movement and it claimed to find in female anatomy - in the very shape of the female genitals - a new realm of freedom. What this amounted to was traditional misogyny turned upside down - now it was female sexuality that was supposedly superior. In any case, the two genders and their respective sexualities were totally unrelated; as one leading theorist of this camp put it, “man’s desire and woman’s are strangers to each other.”¹³ Adjust this point of view for a non-academic and non-feminist audience and we are back in familiar territory - on Mars and Venus with the John Gray road show.

A materialist conception of gender is irreconcilably opposed to both these perspectives. While Marxists are the last people to make light of the psychic scars inflicted on human beings by an inhuman society, we also refuse to be paralyzed by them. The ideas of Marx (and, in their implications, of Freud as well) do not prove that change is impossible; rather, they show that the changes which are needed, whether in the factory

¹² See Louis Althusser, “Freud and Lacan” in *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: [1964], 1971), pp. 189-219.

¹³ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (New York: [1977], 1985), p. 27.

or in the family, are impossible *under capitalism*. The socialist revolution is the essential starting point for overcoming traditional gender roles. Nothing meaningful in this regard can be accomplished until we remove the stranglehold of class exploitation on the family. By measures such as decent, low-cost housing and free, quality day-care for every family, as well as collective kitchens and laundry facilities to do away with the domestic drudgery of women, we can begin to uproot the material conditions which have perpetuated sexual oppression for centuries.

At the same time, we have to free sexual relations from any form of external compulsion: people should be able to live together solely on the basis of mutual attraction and affection, without being bound by economic, legal or religious constraints. This means the abolition of marriage as a legal institution. That would *not* mean, as every priest and reactionary would have it, the end of the family and the unleashing of a wave of barbaric hedonism. The real barbarism exists now: the institution of marriage, stripped of its romantic window-dressing, is really nothing more than legalized prostitution. In a world where women do not need to be 'protected' by a man, where their security and that of their children is guaranteed by society itself and not by a marriage contract, family life will be based on the securest foundation of all - love.

Ultimately the crisis of the family can only be resolved by merging it into the larger community so that children are not bound exclusively to one set of parents but grow up surrounded by a world of mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers. With the purpose of child-rearing no longer being to raise beasts of burden and domestic drudges, childhood will be much less the traumatic experience it is now, and people will cease to be shackled by the traditional gender roles of class society. Love itself will be transformed: no longer debased in relationships of domination and submission, it will come into its own as a tremendously creative force, in social as well as in personal life. Indeed, to people who will have been raised this way, i.e. to the first generations of fully human beings on planet earth, it will seem almost inconceivable to have any other kind of relationship to the world or to each other except one based on love.

End

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Email from David Walsh to Frank Brenner, May 23, 1998.
Subject: gender

My reaction is a very positive one, although, as I say, even if it hadn't been that would not have been a reason for not posting it. I think the question of the relationship of Marxism and Freud is not going to be worked out as easily as the piece suggests, as you are obviously aware, but that will emerge of its own accord.

I think the article speaks to very important issues, including methodological/philosophical ones. There is so much about life these days that is taken for granted, assumed to be natural, etc.

I think it is an improvement on the first version, as I remember it; there were some pretty big leaps in that one, partly because you were trying to compress some large issues into a small space. Here the argument is worked out in a more thorough, although concise, fashion.

I still find the discussion of castration anxiety a little speculative, inevitably so perhaps. One is trying to accomplish an extremely difficult task: working out what goes on in the mind of a largely unconscious creature. Much more can be said on the issue, and probably will be.

As far as I'm concerned, the article should be put on the site within the next few days.

I have forwarded it to BG [i.e. Barry Grey].

DW

Letter from David Walsh to Frank Brenner:

Friday, June 5 [1998]

Dear Frank,

Concerns have been raised about the gender article in discussions here that I would like to share with you.

I think among BG [Barry Grey], DN [David North] and myself there is an agreement and sympathy for the general thrust of the piece, but we are equally agreed that it does not entirely make its case, and at certain points leaves itself open to criticism.

A few smaller points:

P. 5 -- "their love for their parents is a sexual passion." Exclusively? Or "their love for their parents is also a sexual passion" or "includes sexual passion" or "also involves sexual passion"?

P. 7 -- "the emergence of patriarchy represented a massive step backwards, a reversion from a humanized sexuality to an inhuman one" I think is an overstatement. And the qualifier, "as far as gender roles were concerned," doesn't solve the problem. I don't think it's possible to separate out gender roles from other aspects of social life in that way. In any event, this suggests to me an idealized view of prehistoric sexual relations. They were more "humanized"? I'm not convinced. Human beings lived very much in direct, brutish subjection to nature. One would be saying, for example, that Greek civilization represented a massive step backwards. I think that would be a difficult case to make; in any event, it is not made here.

P. 9 -- "But such repression does respond to the needs of *capitalist* society because ..." It seems to BG that since the article has not investigated the specifics of sexual repression under capitalism, nor was that its aim, that the expression *class* society is more appropriate here.

P. 12 -- "By measures such as decent, low-cost housing and free, quality day-care ... etc." BG felt that this seemed a little banal in the given context. After all, such measures have existed in certain welfare states and, at one time, in the Soviet Union, without overturning sexual oppression. I think something might be added about the heightening of the cultural, social and technical levels that a social revolution would produce and its impact on the family.

The more significant issues:

P. 3 -- "though we all know what it means to be masculine or feminine in a biological sense, what about behavior? Here we are really dealing with gender roles -- i.e. what it means to 'act like a man' or to be 'womanly'."

In rightly pointing out that the view that "sexually (sic) identity is biologically determined" is an assumption of [John] Gray and company, you haven't thereby proven the opposite, that sexual behavior is *merely* a matter of acting like a man or being womanly, i.e. gender roles, a social construction. Aren't you asserting here what you need to prove?

For example, my sister-in-law, who is a bright woman, says, in observing her four-year-old son playing with trucks and so forth, playing quite differently from her two previous children, both girls, "Well, it's true, boys are boys, and girls are girls. There really are fundamental differences." One wants to rush in and say, hold on a moment, some of these conditioning processes were well under way by the time he left the womb, or shortly thereafter. Children enter instantly into social relation (sic) and into history. But her conception corresponds to the every-day appearance of things, this is how things appear to common sense.

The same is true if one considers gender historically. People will point to Greek literature and mythology, the stories of the Bible, and suggest, more or less, this is how it has always been, from time immemorial. Your formulation, in my view, will not convince or seriously impact anyone who holds these sorts of views. It will be preaching to the choir, to people who already agree with your point of view. Without some reference to anthropology, history and child development I don't see how you can make a case.

Something needs to be said, it seems to me, about the fact that men and women don't live directly in nature, but in nature mediated through social relations. Because the people you're arguing against see simply abstract, unchanging free-floating Men and Women. Basic issues of historical materialism are involved here, the conception that human nature is the ensemble of social relations.

Then there is the matter of "the inherent bisexuality of human beings." How is this proven? There are three principal references.

1. "We can't tell little boys apart from little girls by anything in their behavior; rather we do so by such things as first names, clothing, hair cuts - i.e. all the outward signs of gender roles that are imposed on children by adults. This is why Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, concluded that, in a psychological sense, children are innately bisexual, that is, they combine the active and passive characteristics associated with both genders." - p. 5

2. "If we are bisexual at birth, then it must be society which makes us into males and females." - p. 6

3. "By the same token, heterosexuality is no more natural than homosexuality because, objectively, the one is as much a *constriction* of the inherent bisexuality of human beings as the other." - p. 9

A) Freud theorized that children were bisexual at birth; B) If that is the case, then it must be society that makes us act as males and females; C) Human beings are inherently bisexual.

Is this a conclusive argument? One may have the gut feeling that it's true without being convinced by this line of reasoning. I think one might say that there is something extremely *suggestive* in children's early behavior without considering the matter proven. It is the categorical character of some of the assertions that troubles me.

Concretely, "If we are bisexual at birth, then it must be society which makes us into males and females." Why? Playing the devil's advocate, one might say, well, in the womb future human beings look more like fish than they do people, does that mean society makes us mammals? We're born bald, does society give us hair? Of course, these are physical characteristics, not behavioral ones, but I still think there's a problem. There is such a thing as a process of maturation. I think someone might easily argue that the bisexuality is precisely an indicator of the unformed, or partially-formed nature of the human being at birth, and that further development, ultimately puberty, brings out his or her inherent characteristics. (Aren't other mammals, who presumably don't live in society, bisexual at birth?)

Would children be as likely, all things being equal, to become homosexual as heterosexual? Do evolution and the development of distinct sexual organs and characteristics have no significance? (Isn't homosexuality itself, in certain circumstances, a social phenomenon?)

It seems to me the polarization of people into rigidly distinct categories - homosexual and heterosexual - is one of the real social issues. My guess is that the well-balanced individual in a future society would probably have both same- and opposite-sex attractions, with the latter, I would imagine, dominating. To suggest, or imply, that one is just as likely to become a homosexual as heterosexual seems to me a little extravagant. It's hard for me to imagine that one's biology is entirely, or almost entirely, a matter of indifference. In any event, perhaps I could be convinced, but the article in its present state hasn't convinced me.

These are some of the issues. I blithely suggested before that even if we disagreed with the piece, or with certain issues raised in it, that wouldn't prevent us from posting it. Well, it's not so simple as that. If we publish the piece, even with an introduction indicating that this is the beginning of a discussion, that we don't necessarily agree with

all the author's opinions, etc., like it or not, its positions will be identified with the WSWS. We have to ask ourselves: do we want to enter into battle behind an article whose arguments we ourselves don't find entirely convincing or fully worked out? It is a peculiar situation, and I hope you will appreciate it.

Our hope is that you will consider the points and consider ways in which you might strengthen the article. I think this can be done. I remain convinced that this is an important *and complex* subject and one we ought (sic) discuss on the web site. I'm sorry I raised your hopes prematurely last week. The fault is entirely mine.

DW

Letter from Frank Brenner to David Walsh, Barry Grey and David North

June 28, 1998.

To: Barry, David W. and David N.

Dear Comrades,

I'd like to respond to your concerns about the article on gender that I've submitted to the WSWS.

Gender is a complex subject, as Dave W. emphasizes in his letter. Not only are there a great many issues that enter into it, but the material is almost entirely uncharted territory as far as Marxism is concerned. It wouldn't be hard to imagine a book length treatment of the subject, and probably that kind of space is necessary to do it justice. But a start has to be made somewhere, and I think the article is precisely that - a start. By using the John Gray fad as a foil, it introduces some important concepts that, at least in my view, hold the key to a materialist theory of gender.

Before getting down to specifics, I think it would be useful to raise a general question: why should Marxists be concerned about gender? We are opposed to sexual oppression, we stand for the complete equality of men and women - and, beyond that, the issue seems to be of only academic interest. But there is a problem with this way of thinking - are men and women capable of being equal? This kind of question simply doesn't arise when it comes to class relations: no one (aside from a shameless apologist for capitalism) would seriously contend that the rich deserve their wealth and power by dint of some inherent superiority. But when it comes to gender relations, the premise of equality is far from self-evident: though men and women are both human, they seem to be very different types of human beings - almost, as Gray would have it, creatures from another planet. If this really is the case, if our biology - and, more specifically, our genitals - makes us into two qualitatively different kinds of people, then there is something necessarily problematic about struggling for equality of the sexes. Of course, it would still be possible to hold to a view that men and women should be 'equal but different'. But inevitably we would have to take those differences into account, at least to some extent. Supposing, to take one of the most common such conceptions, that women are, by their very nature, more nurturing than men - surely, this would have major implications for the future of the family under socialism. Perhaps it would be natural for women to continue having primary responsibility for child-rearing (even if the woman involved isn't necessarily always the biological mother, but a female relative or a daycare worker). And, of course, any such assertion about women carries with it an implicit assertion about men - since they are naturally less nurturing, it must be that they are more independent,

less stable, perhaps even more promiscuous. Again, this would inevitably have a profound effect on any socialist project to restructure the family.

So the stakes for Marxists on this issue are considerable, and one could add here that though these matters have to do with life after the revolution, our position on this kind of question can help - or hinder - our efforts to win support for making the revolution. Is, then, the view of gender as biologically determined valid or not? Before we have recourse to Freud or anyone else, it seems to me that there is something within Marxist theory itself which is fundamentally important in determining our orientation. We know from Engels that the family, far from being a timeless institution as it is commonly portrayed in bourgeois ideology, has instead undergone an astonishing degree of variation throughout history. But such vast changes in the family are inconceivable without changes in gender relations: surely, a transformation as revolutionary as that from matriarchy to patriarchy, where leadership of the family shifted from one gender to another, couldn't help but have a profound impact on gender relations. Even if we cannot say exactly what the nature of those differences were solely on the basis of historical materialism, nonetheless what we can say is that such differences had to exist. But this directly contradicts the biological determinist view, which necessarily rules out historical evolution (to any significant degree) of gender roles: its basic claim is that 'boys are boys, girls are girls' - and that's the way it's always been.

Thus, whether Marxists are aware of it or not, Marxist theory calls for an alternative conception of gender. The problem is that such a conception cannot be deduced directly from the principles of historical materialism; otherwise, we would already have it, or at least the rudiments of it. There isn't anything surprising or disturbing about this: one might just as easily have said that Marxism as a world outlook called for a theory of natural evolution, but this theoretical need could only be met by Darwin's great scientific breakthrough. In the case of gender, a materialist psychology holds the key to developing an alternative to the biological determinist view.

Why psychology? This would seem to be an unwarranted leap to the mind when we are concerned with matters such as gender and sexuality which are clearly related to the body. But again, we come up against one of those questions where Marxist theory calls for something which by itself it cannot fulfill. To make my meaning clear here, I want to pose another question: what would a Marxist theory of sexuality look like? We don't have such a theory as yet, and a search through the Marxist classics will turn up little more than a few passing references to the subject. But what we do have, as with gender, is something of decisive importance in determining our general approach to the subject - the labor theory of human origins. In his essay on that theory, Engels writes that the essential distinction between animals and man is that "the animal merely *uses* external nature, and brings about changes in it simply by his presence; man by his changes makes it serve his ends, *masters* it." We can say from this basic thesis that human culture is nothing else than the accumulated processes of such mastery - which is just how Trotsky defines culture at the outset of "Culture and Socialism." In a recent exposition of Engels's theory, a British academic notes: "Cultural development is expressed through the accumulated material achievements of social practice and the social and spiritual

achievements conditioned by them. *At every stage of historical development, culture is a measure of man's humanization, the degree to which he has separated himself from his animal origins, the extent to which he has humanized nature and his own being as a part of nature through his labor activity.*" (*The Labor Theory of Culture* by Charles Woolfson, p. 8 - my emphasis).

The key to a Marxist theory of sexuality lies in the concept of humanization - i.e. the mastering not only of external nature but also of the nature within man's "own being". What is sexuality in nature? It is an instinct which blindly serves the biological need for reproduction. Animal species are 'wired' to have sex in the sense that their sexual behavior is a rigid pattern controlled almost entirely by hormones. Animals have sex when they go into heat, i.e. when the female is ovulating and therefore conception is possible. There is no 'mastery' of this instinct evident in such behavior; on the contrary, it is the instinct which clearly masters the animal. But human sexuality is distinctly, vastly, different: we do not go into heat, which means that our sexual behavior isn't at all dependent on whether conception is possible. We can have sex virtually whenever we want - even a nursing mother can have sex, something that would be unheard of in the animal kingdom. And we can have sex in an astonishing variety of ways - anally, orally as well as genitally. Again, such behavior is completely absent in other species, with the notable exception of our closest cousins, the higher primates. We could take note of other facts in this regard: the existence of the female clitoris, which serves a sexual but no reproductive function, or the fact that human females have permanent breasts, unlike other female mammals who develop teats only for a short period around the time of giving birth.

All of this points to how human beings have mastered - i.e. humanized - their sexual instinct. *And the cardinal feature of that humanization is the freeing of sexuality from its rigid subordination to reproduction.* Further reflection confirms this: human beings do not have sex in order to reproduce the species. There is no inner compulsion driving us to make babies; on the contrary, pregnancy is far more often than not an unintended, and very much unwanted, consequence of having sex. Moreover, for most of the existence of the human race, the connection between sex and conception wasn't even understood: people had no idea that having intercourse led to having a child. And yet we know that sex has always been a basic human need. A need for what? *Clearly, a need for the fulfillment of sexual desire.* At first glance, it might seem that we are moving in a dubious direction, away from a solidly materialist-sounding category like reproduction to an ambiguous term like desire. But this would be a superficial view of the matter: in truth, we are moving precisely in a materialist direction, one which allows us to understand "the degree to which man has separated himself from his animal origins" insofar as sexuality is concerned. And this also makes it apparent why psychology holds the key to our understanding of these matters - because, again unlike animals, our desire isn't a function of our hormones, but an aspect of our emotional life, i.e. of our psychology. In short, a humanized sexuality can only be understood as, to use the Freudian term, psycho-sexuality. (Needless to say, the fact that human beings engage in sex for pleasure has hardly prevented our species from continuing to reproduce; quite the contrary, from a

Darwinian evolutionary point of view, we would have to say that this adaptation within human sexuality has been wildly successful.)

I hope these points, though not directly addressed to the concerns raised in your letter, will help clarify the theoretical basis of what I am about to say in response to those concerns.

The two most significant issues raised in your letter are about gender roles and bisexuality. On the first matter, you suggest that I've asserted what I needed to prove - i.e. that gender roles are socially constructed. Now, in the article I began by pointing out that those like Gray simply assume that sexual identity is biologically determined, but of course that in itself doesn't prove them wrong. But it seems to me that your reading of the article stops short here: I don't simply assert that because Gray made such an assumption, then the opposite must be true. First of all, I introduce a distinction that is almost always ignored in considerations of gender - a distinction between gender as anatomy and gender as behavior. Freud once noted that masculine and feminine were among the most confused terms in science, aside from their directly physiological meaning. The distinction between anatomy and behavior is usually ignored because in the biological determinist view (which is the view of common sense), anatomy determines behavior. I then introduce 2-3 pages of material to demonstrate that this assumption is not valid: I make reference to the biological record, ethological material on higher primates, the unique nature of human sexuality, the mother-child relationship, labor in matriarchal societies and the behavior of children. Incidentally, at one point, you advise bringing in "some reference to anthropology, history and child development" in order to make my case more convincing, but you seem to have ignored the references to precisely these subjects that I have included. (Which isn't to say, of course, that much more material couldn't be brought in, but only by greatly expanding what is already a very long article and without, in my view, significantly improving its argument.)

Now, what exactly is it that I have proved on the basis of this material? It seems to me that I have made a very reasonable case that anatomy does not determine sexual identity. What, then, does? If biology isn't, so to speak, the culprit, then what else is there? As materialists, we know of only two realms - nature and society. If we have determined that a given phenomenon, despite appearing to be natural, is actually not so (or, more accurately, not primarily so), then we have no choice but to conclude that this phenomenon is social - either that or we leave the door open to outright mystification. And as soon as we begin to look at gender this way, i.e. to 'alienate' it in the Brechtian sense of stripping away its seemingly natural appearance and seeing it as socially and historically determined, then we find that we can shed light on much that is otherwise obscure about these matters.

One thing more. You misrepresent my position when you write that "sexual behavior is *merely* a matter of acting like a man or being womanly, i.e. gender roles, a social construction." Actually, I went out of my way in the article *not* to say this. What I did say was that society is "*primarily* responsible" for gender roles, and I hastened to add: "In rejecting the common sense view, it would be a mistake to swing completely the other

way and deny biology any role whatsoever in gender. The maturing of the human body and the shifting of sexual energy (or libido) to the genitals does provide a biological impetus towards activity for males and passivity for females.” The reason for this statement should be evident from the end of the article: in rejecting the biological determinist view, it would be a serious mistake to follow in the footsteps of those like Lacan and Althusser and end up with a purely social determinist point of view, one which invariably turns into a justification for the omnipotence of the ruling class. My aim was to arrive at a balanced view of gender and I believe the article manages to do that.

As for people like Dave’s sister-in-law, who believes that “boys are boys and girls are girls”, it seems to me that this is just why the article I have submitted needs to be posted - so as to begin the process of educating such people, who are of course the great majority within bourgeois society, including the millions who buy John Gray’s books. Now, will our arguments readily convince such people? No, not more than an article on the labor theory of value or the class nature of American society would readily win them over to Marxist politics. The process of enlightenment on such an issue is necessarily going to be a long and patient struggle - we are fighting a backwardness that is ancient and deeply-entrenched. But, as I said at the outset of these remarks, we have to begin somewhere - silence on our parts will certainly not convince anyone of anything. As for the claim that I am “preaching to the choir, to people who already agree” with my point of view, I have to wonder who these people are. Surely they don’t exist within the party, whose members and supporters have never heard of most of the ideas presented in the article. And probably the same is true of most of the new readers of the WSWS. If, by “preaching to the choir”, you are referring to middle class radicals and academics, I doubt they will find much in the article to be happy about. Of course, superficially, there is some common ground when it comes to the conception that gender is socially constructed, but there is the same kind of superficial resemblance on class questions, i.e. radicals make use of all kinds of Marxist rhetoric about class, socialism, etc. The final section of the article, I think, draws a very clear distinction between a genuinely Marxist standpoint on this issue and the various radical and academic points of view.

There are finally some remarks about how “men and women don’t live directly in nature, but in nature mediated through social relations” and how we need to make reference to “the conception of human nature as the ensemble of social relations.” I don’t disagree with this, but I believe that I’ve already addressed the substantive issue in my previous remarks about the humanization of sexuality. The truth is that Marxists do not have a worked-out “conception of human nature”; if they did, then we would have long ago developed a materialist analysis of gender, among other things. Often, however, there is a tendency to fall back on the formulation “the ensemble of social relations” as if this by itself could solve specific problems. Marx’s thesis is a brilliant insight and an indispensable weapon against Feuerbachian (i.e. liberal) notions of ‘abstract’ man, but left on the general plane of philosophy, it too can become an abstraction, even one put to reactionary purposes. After all, couldn’t it be argued that, since we live in capitalist society, and since human nature is determined by social relations, therefore human nature is capitalist! Needless to say, this is pure bourgeois ideology - we are all born greedy, acquisitive, selfish, etc. I think Marx and Engels made it perfectly evident in their own

work, especially through their interest in Bachofen and Morgan, that they wanted a much more concrete notion of human nature than is contained in the “ensemble of social relations” thesis. And, as I argued above, I think they provided the first, indispensable, indications as to how such a conception could be arrived at. In this sense, I agree that “basic issues of historical materialism are involved here” - because I strongly believe that it is incumbent on Marxists today to carry that theoretical work forward by developing a concrete conception of human nature. Such a conception would need to demonstrate how our species has ‘mastered’ its own, instinctive, nature in the course of its existence. It would also need to demonstrate both how human nature is molded by social relations and, at least as important, how it necessarily *conflicts* with certain types of social relations - those based on the domination of one human being by another.

(That Marx saw the need for developing a materialist conception of human nature is evident from the following remarks in *Capital* attacking Jeremy Bentham, for whom utility was the essential human attribute: “To know what is useful for a dog, one must study dog-nature. This nature itself is not to be deduced from the principle of utility. *Applying this to man, he that would criticize all human acts, movements, relations, etc., by the principle of utility, must first deal with human nature in general, and then with human nature as modified in each historical epoch.*” [Vol. 1, p. 571, n. 2 - my emphasis]. What is significant here is Marx’s call for a conception of “human nature in general” as well as an understanding of how that nature has changed historically; indeed, without the former, it is evident that any conception of the latter is going to be highly problematic.)

Let me now address your concerns about bisexuality. Again, you feel that I’ve asserted what I needed to prove. You summarize the article’s argument as follows: “A) Freud theorized that children were bisexual at birth; B) If that is the case, then it must be society that makes us act as males and females; C) Human beings are inherently bisexual.” This makes it sound as if the theory of bisexuality is based solely on Freud’s authority, i.e. Freud said this and therefore it must be true. I don’t think this is a fair assessment of the case I was making. The theory of bisexuality is of a piece with the conception of gender as socially constructed - and therefore is based on all the evidence countering the opposing, common sense, view. First and foremost in this regard is the distinctive nature of human sexuality. Is human sexuality for pleasure or for reproduction? This is the fundamental dividing line on this issue between materialism and an idealism which takes the form of biological determinism. Let me go back to what I said earlier: a Marxist theory of sexuality would necessarily be a theory of how human beings have ‘mastered’ this instinct - and the measure of that mastery is precisely the extent to which sexuality is no longer mechanically subordinated to reproduction. But if human sex is for pleasure, then there is no reason why pleasure cannot be obtained as much from one sex as from another - no reason, that is, in human nature. There are plenty of reasons in social life, or rather in the social life of class society where a ruling class needs to restrict human sexuality to the bare minimum of reproduction. But these restrictions - and the gender roles that go with them - are a *reversion* to an inhuman form of sexuality. Where this kind of repression is weak or has only begun to be imposed - in early periods of history, primitive societies, and childhood - the behavior of humans is ‘naturally’ bisexual, i.e. it is active *and* passive, and attracted to objects of desire of either gender.

But might not a child's bisexuality simply be a sign of immaturity that gets resolved by later physical development? This is a valid question, and I tried to address it in the article. First off, as to society not making us into mammals or giving us hair, to conflate these matters with sexuality is to mix apples and oranges, or rather biology and behavior, as you yourself concede. But a biological process of maturation certainly does play a role in gender. As I said before, my aim in the article was to put forward a balanced view and, in the passage I quoted above, I made a point of stating that while gender is primarily socially determined, biology does provide an impetus, specifically through the shifting of libido to the genitals at puberty. But I also made the point that an impetus is not an imperative: it is society which shapes the biological raw material in certain directions while repressing others. For example, while biology shifts libido to the genitals, it also shifts libido to the clitoris, which has no reproductive function. Thus, if we contend that biology provides an impetus to genital sex, we must also be willing to admit that biology provides an impetus to oral sex - which is of course a type of sex that can be gratified by either gender. And, for that matter, in shifting libido to the penis, biology doesn't at the same time compel the penis to seek gratification only in the vagina: on the contrary, the mouth and anus - again, of either gender - will do as well, to say nothing of masturbation. To which we can add that biology has also endowed other parts of the human body besides the genitals with the ability to be 'libidinized', including the breasts- male as well as female - skin, ears, toes, etc.

Moreover, when we speak of a process of maturation, we have to understand this process in a dialectical way: a later stage, i.e. genital sexuality, does not cancel out earlier stages, i.e. oral and anal sexuality, but rather supersedes them in He!gel's sense of terminating *and* preserving. Surely, there is nothing mature or fully developed about a genital sexuality in which the sexual act consists solely of a man mounting a woman and thrusting his penis into her vagina until ejaculation; on the contrary, this kind of behavior is clearly a mark of extreme repression, of the constriction of sexuality to a mechanical, inhuman coldness. For genital intercourse not to be this kind of abortive act, for it to be a full and satisfying expression of human sexuality, something more is required - foreplay. But what is foreplay? It is a 'regression' to earlier oral and anal stages of sexuality, and, one might add, to sex as playfulness. But the dialectic at work here is that without this 'regression', without the preservation of these earlier stages, genital sexuality itself regresses - from humanized sexuality to the dehumanized behavior of animals.

The fact of the matter is that biology makes many kinds of sexuality possible - but what it doesn't do is assign any one of these possibilities some kind of favored status. Since they are all possible, therefore they are equally natural - and beyond this bare fact, biology can 'tell' us nothing more. It would be different if some types of sexuality led, say, to impotence or death - that would be a loud and clear biological 'message' not to engage in that kind of activity. But there are no such cases and there is no such 'message', and to invoke biology beyond that is completely illegitimate, at least from the standpoint of materialism. And yet many kinds of sexuality have been subjected to extreme repression - in the case of the clitoris, for instance, to outright castration. This is why the logic of biological determinism is so reactionary: it rationalizes the sanctioning of social norms -

i.e. the norms of *class* society - as 'natural' along with the banning of any kind of behavior which doesn't conform to such norms as 'unnatural'.

Underneath the scientific veneer of biological determinism lurks bourgeois moral puritanism. Marxism is infused by a completely different spirit, expressed in Marx's great, liberating credo - Nothing human is alien to me. Nowhere is it more important to bear this in mind than in relation to sexuality, a field so beset by repressive pressures and prejudices that it is all too easy to condemn behavior that is 'alien to me' as being 'perverted', 'sick', 'unnatural', etc. Marx's credo is a call not only for tolerance but also for a great opening up of our notion of what it means to be human. And this spirit was very much alive in the practice of the greatest exponents of Marxism. For instance, the Bolsheviks were the first government in history to decriminalize homosexuality, among many other reforms they initiated in family life and sexual relations. (Of course, it was soon re-criminalized by Stalin, not least because many gay artists and intellectuals were sympathetic to the Left Opposition.)

The issue of homosexuality is something of a touchstone here: as I noted in the article, it has been subjected to greater repression than any other form of sexuality in bourgeois society, and this remains true today, despite recent 'embellishments' (as Engels would have put it) in the legal rights of homosexuals. Of course this doesn't mean that we should make any concessions to the morass of gay 'identity' politics - anymore than our opposition to the oppression of women means a concession to feminism. But it doesn't help to avoid one morass by sinking into another. Just as we wouldn't counter feminism by embracing misogyny, so we would be wrong to counter gay identity politics by making any concessions to the prevailing homophobia of bourgeois ideology. But we make precisely such a concession if we hold to a view that heterosexuality is 'natural' whereas homosexuality isn't. This is the view which seems to underlie your concern that the theory of bisexuality means that children "are as likely, all things being equal, to become homosexual as heterosexual". Actually, it doesn't mean that at all because you've left out a third possibility - that children could remain bisexual throughout life. But before saying more about that, I think it's worth asking: why should Marxists be concerned even if it were the case that children had a 50-50 chance of growing up gay or straight? The only reason for such a concern would be a belief that one of these options isn't 'natural', and that belief is evident in your suggestion that homosexuality - but not heterosexuality - is a "social phenomenon" that only arises "in certain circumstances".

As to this last point, the fact of the matter is that homosexuality has been around for a very long time. It is common knowledge that it goes back at least as far as Ancient Greece and its more or less open presence can be traced in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and right through to the modern era. Thus, I don't think there can be any dispute that homosexuality is a permanent feature of sexual life in class society. (And, lest we turn it solely into an aberration of class society, there is even evidence for homosexuality in the matrilineal societies studied by anthropologists like Margaret Mead, though the distinctions between types of sexuality seem a good deal less developed in such societies.) The idea that homosexuality only arises in "certain circumstances" - to speak plainly, in periods of decadence - is a prejudice that derives from the illusions of

class ideology rather than the realities of social life. In 'normal' times within class society, homosexuality is driven underground and so it seems to disappear, an illusion that is still common today in countries where homosexuality remains a crime. But this 'disappearance' is simply a function of religious and state repressiveness - the desire persists in the privacy of the bedroom or, at the very least, in fantasy. When a class or a regime goes into crisis and its social control begins to falter, the banned behavior invariably reemerges - which only confirms the fact that the underlying desire had never really gone away. Perhaps the best indication of the extent and persistence of homosexuality is simply the fact that, until recently, it has been universally outlawed. As Freud pointed out in relation to incest, societies only need to impose a ban on things that people desire to do, since if there were no such desire, there wouldn't be any need to prohibit it.

A 'queer theorist' (as the academic fashion of the day would have it) would use this history to argue that homosexuality and heterosexuality are both 'natural'. But another, very different, interpretation is possible - that both types are unnatural, that they represent a bifurcation of an instinct that has been forced out of its natural current of bisexuality. This interpretation is much more radical, in the sense that Marx used this term of going to the root of things, and entirely reshapes the terms of the discussion. The mainstream bourgeois ideologue wants to contend that heterosexuality - the sexual norm of his society - is 'natural' and healthy. His petty bourgeois, 'queer theorist' counterpart wants to contend that homosexuality is equally 'natural' and healthy. Against both, Marxists have to expose the truth - that an inhuman society can only create unnatural, i.e. constricted and inhuman, forms of sexuality.

Thus, I strongly agree with you when you say that "the polarization of people into rigidly distinct categories - homosexual and heterosexual" is a fundamental problem. Again, it's worth pointing out what is at stake in these matters - not the reformist small change of the identity politics protesters but a vision of a new type of human personality, one no longer shackled by having to be either gay or straight. It should go without saying that this kind of change is only conceivable in a communist society, but it also should be evident that the change itself would be a vast one. I think you seriously underestimate it when you say: "My guess is that the well-balanced individual in a future society would probably have both same- and opposite-sex attractions, with the latter, I would imagine, dominating." The fact is that this is pretty much how people already behave in bourgeois society - mostly heterosexual with some degree of homosexual attraction, which is largely (though not always) unconscious. There is still a huge leap from this to a sexuality in which desire would not be determined by whether someone has a penis or a vagina in their pants. In communist society, we will love each other, first and foremost, as *humans* rather than as men or women. And sexual love will become an integral part of human relations, of how we work, of the friendships we have, of the way we live in the world - rather than confined to the shameful privacy of the bedroom.

As for the smaller points raised, I'll be as brief as I can in responding to them.

First, the love of children is a sexual passion. You are worried that this is too categorical and you want some indication that sexuality is only part of this love. I think to do so would be a serious mistake. Infantile sexuality has always been one of the most furiously attacked of Freud's theories, and I think we should make a very clear statement in defense of that theory. It is certainly true that children's feelings for their parents come to involve more than sexuality - I was, after all, addressing the issue only in passing - but it is equally true that their love for their parents *begins* as a sexual passion and then becomes sublimated, in part, into a non-sexual affection. The danger today, ideologically, is to give in to those who want to obscure the significance of infantile sexuality. If we qualify this statement, we are opening the door to an idealist notion that children are born with some kind of pure, asexual, affection that exists apart from their instinctive sexuality.

Second, you are concerned with the statement that "the emergence of patriarchy represented a massive step backwards, a reversion from a humanized sexuality to an inhuman one." You quite deliberately ignore the qualifier - "as far as gender roles are concerned" - and then turn what I am saying into something entirely different - that patriarchy doesn't represent social progress. This is not what I am saying. The problem you have here is that your notion of progress is non-dialectical: since patriarchy is an advance over matriarchy, therefore for you every aspect of life in the one must be better than in the other. I am not, as you claim, separating out gender roles from other aspects of social life; I am simply arguing that progress doesn't happen in a straight line and that, while in economic terms, patriarchy meant a big step forward, in other respects - specifically those to do with gender relations - it represented an enormous step backward. Actually, your argument here isn't with me so much as with Engels: it is he who uses the term - indeed he emphasizes it - that the onset of patriarchy represented a "*world-historic defeat of the female sex*". If we take this statement seriously, as I think we must, then it is entirely legitimate to speak of patriarchy representing "a massive step backwards" in gender relations. But you are worried that that would mean "that Greek civilization represented a massive step backwards". Yes, it means precisely that - *insofar as gender relations are concerned*. And that is just what Engels does say: "... the woman was degraded, enthralled, the slave of the man's lust, a mere instrument for breeding children. *This lowered position of women, especially manifest among the Greeks of the Heroic, and still more of the Classical Age, has become gradually embellished and, in part, clothed in a milder form, but by no means abolished.*" Indeed, one of the basic themes of *The Origin of the Family* is that matriarchal society, i.e. primitive communism, represented, in some fundamental respects, a much more human society - i.e. a society much more in accordance with human nature - than the class society that replaced it. And there is a mountain of anthropological literature confirming that view, including, notably, the work of Lewis Henry Morgan.

A further point concerns changing capitalist to class society, and I have no objection to that. Finally, as to the measures for fighting sexual oppression, I agree with the suggestion to add a remark about heightening cultural, social and technical levels. I would only add that we should be careful not to underestimate the impact on people's lives of things like housing, collective kitchens, laundries, etc. The truth is that the Soviet

Union never did could get very far with this for economic reasons and, as for the welfare state in the advanced capitalist countries, it only implemented these measures to an extremely limited extent. Collective kitchens have never existed (though the proliferation of fast food chains is a typical exploitation of this need for profit), daycare never got beyond a patchwork system so that today it represents one of the chief financial drains on young, working class families (to the extent that it is available at all), and housing represents an issue of potentially great revolutionary significance. Obviously, we aren't 'sewer socialists', but we also need to be keenly sensitive to how these issues play out in what the Freudians would call mass psychology. No, sexual oppression will not disappear on its own simply on the basis of such measures, but a world where cooking, washing, and child-minding are genuinely socialized would represent the lifting of an enormously oppressive burden from the shoulders of women, and make other, deeper changes possible in the restructuring of the family and the reshaping of the human personality.

I hope this letter has adequately addressed your concerns and that you will now consider posting the article on gender. If you wish to pursue any of these matters further, I would be happy to discuss them with you either by e-mail or over the phone.

Yours fraternally,

Frank B.