Marx’s work in the early to mid-1840s focused mainly on two important areas. The first of these is a general critique of bourgeois society, especially the work of political economists in Germany, France and Britain. Secondly, Marx explicated his own theory of history, society, and social change. In both of these areas, Marx carried out significant discussions of gender and the family.

This chapter will discuss four of Marx’s works from the 1840s and one brief article from 1850, each of which contain significant discussions of gender and the family. Marx’s major break with liberalism came in 1843–4, with what is now referred to as the 1844 Manuscripts. These manuscripts contain a brief but valuable discussion of gender, in which he argues that the position of women can be used as a measure of the general development of society. They also feature notable discussion of the relationship between humanity and nature, one that points toward a different understanding of the nexus between biology and society than is usually attributed to Marx. The Holy Family, co-authored with Engels, responds to Eugène Sue’s moralistic novel Les Mystères de Paris. Marx defends the fictional character Fleur de Marie, a Paris prostitute, against Sue’s moralism and argues that Fleur de Marie is more human than most others in bourgeois society, even though she lives in inhuman conditions. This is the case because bourgeois ideology has yet to affect her. The German Ideology, also co-authored with Engels, argues that the family...
contains all of the significant contradictions that develop within society and that slavery is latent within the structure of the family. In a little-known text written in 1846, Marx employs the writings of the French police-official Jacques Peuchet on suicide. Here, Marx stresses bourgeois family-morality, patriarchal power and their deleterious effects on women. Finally, in an article for the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung- Politisch-Ökonomische Revue* in 1850, Marx and Engels provide a brief discussion of the nature/culture and man/woman dualisms. From this discussion, it becomes clear that Marx paid at least some attention to gender and the family in his early work and saw it as an important factor in terms of understanding society.

The 1844 Manuscripts

Although unpublished during his own lifetime, the 1844 Manuscripts were Marx’s first explication of his overall theory of society and social change. Within this important study, Marx tackles a number of critical topics such as the alienation inherent in capitalist society; the economic and political structures of capitalism; and a critique and modification of Hegel’s dialectic. He also elaborates a critique of existing notions of communism. Within these manuscripts, Marx discusses gender-relations in the essay ‘Private Property and Communism’, which argues that the position of women is a key measure of the general development of society. Moreover, as I will argue below, Marx’s dialectical understanding of the relationship between nature, culture and labour may potentially be compatible with a feminist interpretation of the relationship between nature and culture, especially as it relates to women.

Di Stefano, voluntarism and transcendence

Christine Di Stefano takes a relatively critical approach to Marx’s writings as they relate to women. According to Di Stefano, Marx’s writings are ‘masculinist’ in at least three ways: an aggressive discursive style; a teleological and

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3. While she is correct in pointing out Marx’s adversarial discursive style, Di Stefano’s argument in this regard is somewhat flawed. She goes too far in arguing that ‘His approach to an issue was invariably one that proceeded over the toppled remains of existing, would-be, or fabricated opponents’ and that ‘his typical polemical mode involves “marking out his own position by eliminating former or potential colleagues from it”’ (Di Stefano 1991b, p. 107). Marx was often very critical of other scholars, but his work was more than a mere negation of their work in favour of his own. Rather, Marx often critically appropriated material from some of those he criticised, most prominently Ricardo and Hegel.