Feminism is the struggle against sexism, or discriminatory social practices and ideologies that result in male supremacy and female oppression. Sexism as a form of social oppression is not a modern phenomenon. Paraphrasing Marx and Engels, it can be stated that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles and sex struggles because the existence of classes presupposes private ownership of the means of production, monogamy, and therefore sexism. The presence of sexism throughout history accounts for the ease with which it has been taken for granted as a universal feature of all societies or as the product of innate differences between the sexes. This also explains why women today search for its historical origins in an effort to understand its present manifestations. Within the social sciences, the conceptualisation of sexism depends upon the basic assumptions about human nature, society, and their relationship which underlie current theories about society and social behaviour; theories vary in the emphasis given to either human nature or society. If priority is given to human nature, persons are considered to have inherent traits such as selfishness, competitiveness, and utilitarianism. Social relations and institutions are viewed, consequently, as products of those individual traits. In this context, men and women are considered to have innate traits that make them different from each other. For example, while males are aggressive, strong, instrumental, etc., females are weak, submissive, affective, nurturant, etc. Sex differences in power and in social participation are conceptualised as consequences of these inherent differences between the sexes. When the emphasis is placed upon society, persons are viewed as empty slates, the product of the socialisation process which integrates them into a powerful and coercive social reality. Sexism emerges, within this context, as a product of social organisation; men and women are different and have different powers and social participation because they are socialised differently. Socialisation

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1 Gimenez 1975; abridged with permission from the publishers.
2 Marx and Engels 1994, p. 158.
3 Engels 1972.
patterns are then explained in terms of social needs and/or processes of functional differentiation and division of labour.\(^4\)

From a Marxist standpoint, the social sciences present competing idealist and materialist explanations of sexism which do not preclude their combination in explanations which take into account both individual and social factors. Marxism transcends the dichotomy between innate and acquired traits and posits, instead, the notion that ‘man is the ensemble of social relations’.\(^5\)

This notion is the basis of the Marxist theory of human nature, which negates the notion of an isolated human nature and affirms the inextricable unity between persons and their natural and social environments. Marxism postulates that neither persons nor their natural and social environment can be viewed in isolation, as things in themselves which ‘interact’ with one another or which are the ‘cause’ or the ‘effect’ of the other. The theoretical focus shifts from the abstractions of ‘persons’ and ‘environment’ (natural and social) to the processes through which persons, nature, and society acquire definite objective forms. These processes are historically specific and can be identified for the purposes of scientific analysis. In this context, the key to understanding sexism rests upon the exploration of its historically specific forms within concrete modes of production. The understanding and conceptualisation of sexism today presupposes, therefore, an understanding of its place within the capitalist mode of production.\(^6\)

\(^4\) The notion of functional differentiation refers to social processes which result in the loss of functions by a given institution and the emergence of new institutions that take care of those tasks. For example, education and job training used to take place in a family context. The concept of division of labour refers to the social distribution of tasks, who does what and where.


\(^6\) Within social science terminology and everyday language, social reality is perceived through a very general and abstract concept: *society*. Societies are classified in several types: industrial, developed, developing, traditional, underdeveloped, etc. This way of looking at social reality emphasises continuity. Although societies change, it is assumed that they will always present certain characteristics such as social inequality, families, sexism, and institutions of social control. Those characteristics will remain in the context of changes in the division of labour and functional differentiation which increase the complexity of society without changing its basic nature. While Marx acknowledges the existence of elements common to all social epochs, he argues that: a) there are other elements which are not common to all epochs (e.g. social inequality, wage labour, private property); and b) it is necessary to distinguish those definitions that apply to all societies in general ‘in order not to overlook the essential differences existing despite the unity that follows from the very fact that the subject, mankind, and the object, nature, are the same’ (Marx 1970a, p. 190). All social reality stems from the interplay between man and nature in production; the concept of *society* emphasises the continuity that emerges from that fact while the concept of *mode of production* grasps the qualitatively