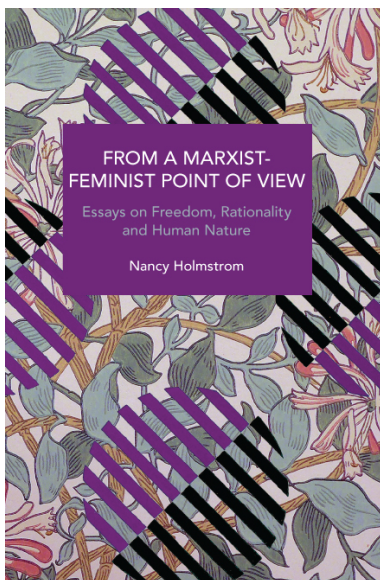


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Reviews

A Review of Nancy Holmstrom's "From a Marxist-Feminist Point of View"



- Reviews section -
Publication date: Tuesday 21 April 2026

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Nancy Holmstrom's *From a Marxist-Feminist Point of View: Essays on Freedom, Rationality and Human Nature* [1] is a collection of essays written across several decades by a philosopher whose commitment to theoretically and politically integrating Marxism and feminism has remained unfashionably steady across half a century of shifting intellectual trends. Emerita Professor of Philosophy at Rutgers University-Newark, Holmstrom has spent her career doing what analytic philosophy in its mainstream forms has largely refused to do: taking the political and economic structures that condition human life seriously and asking what philosophy—rigorously practiced—has to say about them. The book announces its ambition plainly. As Holmstrom writes in her introduction, the essays integrate her intellectual work with “the values I have been committed to all my life: freedom, justice and equality.” [2] What distinguishes this collection is that the integration is genuine. In Holmstrom's case, the political commitments are not context for the philosophical work—they *are* its content.

The volume is organized into four thematic parts—“Modes of Production,” “Rationality,” “Freedom,” and “Human Nature/Women's Nature”—unified by a sustained engagement with Marx's concept of the mode of production and a normative commitment to freedom, equality, and social justice. Holmstrom is explicit that the sections are not independent but represent different theoretical angles on the same underlying question: how does capitalism structure social life, subjectivity, gender, and the horizon of emancipation? Together they constitute a systematic Marxist Feminist perspective.

The opening section, “Modes of Production,” establishes the theoretical framework that underpins the entire collection. In “Developing Marx's Mode of Production Theory,” Holmstrom argues that Marx provides the quintessential methodological tool for understanding historical and social change: different societies are structured by distinct ways of organizing production and extracting surplus labor, and these structures shape political institutions, social relations, and forms of oppression. Crucially, exploitation is not unique to capitalism but characteristic of all class societies; what distinguishes capitalism is the specific mechanism through which surplus labor is extracted—wage labor within a competitive market system—and it is this specificity that holds the key to understanding the system as a whole.

The author's treatment of Marxist and Socialist Feminist theory is particularly valuable here. In “Marxist/Socialist Feminist Theory and Practice in the USA Today,” Holmstrom engages critically with dual-systems theories of both capitalism and patriarchy and with the concept of intersectionality, proposing in their place what she calls a “framework model”—a nonreductive, single system approach in which the capitalist mode of production is foundational, but not mechanically determinative of gender or racial oppression. This model, she argues, preserves Marxism's explanatory power while recognizing the autonomy and specificity of other forms of domination, avoiding both the reduction of sexism to class and the proliferation of incommensurable systems that end in explanatory pluralism.

The author addresses two additional debates central to feminist debates. “Women's Work, the Family and Capitalism” revisits the domestic labor debate with sustained attention to Marx's own categories, arguing that unpaid reproductive labor, though it does not produce surplus value in the strict sense, remains central to the reproduction of the labor force and therefore to capitalism's functioning. The essay “Sex, Work and Capitalism” further addresses the question of the status of sex work under capitalism, which I return to below.

The second part, “Rationality,” mounts a sustained and illuminating critique of the individualist utility maximization model dominant in economics and analytic social philosophy. In “Rationality and Revolution,” Holmstrom examines

the argument that revolutionary collective action cannot be rational—that individuals, as utility maximizers, will always free ride on the efforts of others—and argues that this framework is ideological in Marx's sense: it reflects and reinforces the social relations of capitalist society by portraying individuals as isolated maximizers and rendering solidarity, emotional commitment, and political struggle incomprehensible. Against this, she develops a Marxist alternative in which rationality has to do with bringing social life under conscious collective control—a conception in which socialism is, in a fundamental sense, more rational than capitalism. "For a Sustainable Future: The Centrality of Public Goods" extends this argument to the ecological crisis. In a reduction ad absurdum of the individualist model, Holmstrom demonstrates that, if fully rational behavior means each agent maximizes their own utility regardless of social consequences, rationality leads to the species' self-destruction.

Part Three, "Freedom," is arguably the philosophical heart of the collection. "Free Will and a Marxist Concept of Natural Wants" is a genuinely original contribution to the free will debate. Standard compatibilist positions on free will identify free acts with those caused by the agent's own desires; Holmstrom argues that this account of free will is inadequate without a distinction between wants that are truly a person's own and those imposed by social conditions the agent did not choose and cannot clearly perceive. Drawing on Marx's account of false consciousness and ideology, she argues that most actions performed under capitalism are unfree in the most basic sense—not because they are externally compelled, but because they spring from desires distorted by a class society that systematically produces wants compatible with its own reproduction. This is not fatalism, but diagnosis. It points toward the conditions—material abundance, collective self-governance, genuine alternatives—under which free action would become possible on a broader scale. Written as a response to Ann Cudd's liberal defense in their coauthored book *Capitalism, For and Against: A Feminist Debate*, the section's major essay, "Against Capitalism as Theory and Reality," offers a comprehensive and rigorous examination of whether capitalism is good for women. [3] Working through questions of self ownership, political freedom, structural constraint, sweatshop labor, and global inequality with exemplary care, Holmstrom concludes that, while capitalism generates real possibilities for women, its structural imperatives—competitive growth, privatized care, market discipline—systematically undermine women's interests and conditions of life. In particular, it undermines those of working-class and poor women worldwide.

The final section of the volume, "Human Nature/Women's Nature," addresses longstanding debates about whether human beings—or women in particular—possess a distinct nature. Holmstrom's starting point is a Marxist account of human nature as both biologically grounded in needs, capacities, and embodiment and historically specific in its concrete forms. For Marx, human "nature" is not a static essence but a historically evolving ensemble of capacities, needs, and dispositions shaped by labor and social relations. Within this framework, "A Marxist Theory of Women's Nature" argues that Marxist Feminists should not dismiss the question of whether there is such a thing as women's nature. The latter should not be understood in essentialist and biologist terms, insofar as women's nature arises from women's distinctive social labor—pregnancy and childbirth where socially organized, primary caregiving, domestic labor, emotional and relational work—which shapes characteristic attentiveness to others, responsiveness to dependency, emotional attunement, and practical intelligence. Holmstrom is careful to insist that this does not mean all women share these traits, that men cannot develop them, or that they are fixed; they are historically dominant tendencies, unevenly distributed, socially reproduced, and politically transformable.

The essay "Humankind(s)" compares the concepts of human nature, gender, and race, examining how all three have been used ideologically to justify existing hierarchies, and arguing that while gender and race function similarly as social and political constructs, race has no biological analogue to sex.

The collection closes with "Alienation, Freedom and Human Nature," in which Holmstrom reads alienation not as a concept confined to Marx's early writings but as present throughout *Capital*. Holmstrom argues that alienation, alongside exploitation, represents an ineliminable evil of capitalism that no more humane form of the system could overcome. The essay closes on a moral claim: if human beings have enormous, unrealized potential that would make them happier and more fulfilled if developed, and if this development requires an egalitarian and free society, then we have a powerful reason to build such a society and to cultivate the empathy, solidarity, and reciprocity necessary to

achieve it.

Throughout the volume, Holmstrom does not treat Marx as an oracle whose conclusions are to be defended but as a theorist whose framework, rigorously developed and extended, can engage productively with debates in mainstream philosophy—on free will, on rationality, on property rights, or on exploitation—and illuminate them in ways those debates have missed. At the same time, the essays never lose sight of the political stakes. Organized to reveal their cumulative logic rather than their chronology, they constitute an argument that freedom, properly understood, remains an unrealized possibility under capitalism, and that the task of philosophy is not merely to interpret this situation but to make clear what overcoming it would require.

This volume is an impressive achievement of rigor and theoretical depth. Yet some of the individual arguments developed in the book do present some problems. I will focus here on two of them: the essay on sex work and the one on women's nature.

Holmstrom begins her essay, "Sex, Work and Capitalism," noting her frustration with the feminist debate concerning prostitution and arguing that she finds the feminist position that sex work is just work like any other unpersuasive. Instead, she argues that "even for those in a situation allowing a greater variety of choices that are not totally awful, I believe that prostitution is not 'simply a kind of service work' and is not work that feminists should regard as unproblematic." [4] As she argues, "only with great effort of dissociation is sex ever purely physical, which can be a useful defence, but this often takes a psychic toll." [5] In the final section of the essay, Holmstrom further argues that a good policy would be a variant of the Nordic model—that is, decriminalizing both the selling and buying of sex but criminalizing pimps and brothels. [6] What is striking is that both arguments are developed without any robust engagement with the analyses articulated by sex worker organizations and unions themselves. This is not a minor omission. The essay's concluding acknowledgment that "whatever legal changes and social policies are considered vis à vis the sex industry, the organizations of sex workers themselves should be given a central role in formulating and implementing them" reads, in this context, as purely formalistic. [7] Most sex worker organizations and unions, in fact, actively oppose the criminalization of pimps and brothels and are extremely critical of the Nordic model. [8]

Concerning "A Marxist Theory of Women's Nature," in this essay Holmstrom develops a philosophically careful position, which is genuinely antiessentialist. Yet a difficulty remains. While Holmstrom avoids biological essentialism, the account still rests on a generalizing claim about women's nature as shaped by a specific social role and kind of labor. As she argues, "the generalizations true of women and not men describe emotions and behavior that reflect specific cognitive/affective structures more often found among women. My contention is that there is probably a common core of psychological traits found more often among women than among men throughout the world, of which women of different (sub)cultures have different subsets." [9]

As Holmstrom is aware, the social organization of women's labor, including reproductive and care labor, varies enormously across geographical space, class positions, racial formations, and sexual arrangements. The problem is not merely that the generalization fails to apply to all individuals—Holmstrom addresses this by methodologically appealing to taxonomy—but that the generalization may have no stable referent in reality at all. [10] At best, one might speak of women's multiple natures, shaped by multiple and intersecting social positions; but then the conceptual and political usefulness of the notion becomes unclear. There is also a structural asymmetry worth noting: Marx's account of human nature operates at the level of the species, beginning with very generic features of human beings as social animals capable of shaping themselves and the world through cooperative labor across history. The requirements for positing a specifically women's nature are more demanding, since they refer to a specific social role and particular kind of social organization; at that level of specificity, the argument becomes considerably more fraught. The question of trans people, absent from Holmstrom's account as she acknowledges in the introduction, sharpens these limitations further. [11]

The critical difficulties identified above—around sex work and around women's nature—do not undermine the collection's overall achievement. *From a Marxist-Feminist Point of View*, is an impressive achievement of rigor and

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theoretical depth, and one that should be welcomed by anyone working at the intersection of Marxist theory and feminist politics. Its strongest contributions lie in the middle sections: the critique of individualist rationality, the account of natural wants and freedom, and the comprehensive demolition of capitalism's claim to be uniquely beneficial for women.

Source: [Spectre](#).

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[1] Nancy Holmstrom, [From a Marxist-Feminist Point of View: Essays on Freedom, Rationality, and Human Nature](#), Chicago: Haymarket 2025.

[2] Holmstrom, 1.

[3] "[Capitalism. For and Against: A Feminist Debate](#), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

[4] Holmstrom, 35.

[5] Holmstrom, 37.

[6] Holmstrom, 40.

[7] Holmstrom, 41.

[8] See abolitionist critiques of the Nordic model by, for example, the organizations under the umbrella of The Global Network of Sex Work Projects: [The Real Impact of the Swedish Model on Sex Workers](#), Edinburgh, 2014; [Challenging the introduction of the Nordic Model](#) Edinburgh: 2017.

[9] Holmstrom, 238.

[10] Holmstrom, 238–39.

[11] Holmstrom, 8, 6