Rematerializing Feminism

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ABSTRACT: The “cultural turn” in feminism has isolated issues of gender and sexuality from their material conditions. This article addresses this turn by engaging such issues as “gender,” “history,” “agency,” “modernity,” “postmodernity,” “essentialism,” “theory,” “class,” “sexuality,” “identity politics,” “labor” and the “concrete” in their materiality. While “post” theories have treated these and related practices as “cultural” effects and regarded them as (semi-)autonomous acts of resistance, culture is never isolated from its material base and cultural resistance, in and of itself, is not capable of transforming social totality. The most effective way to undertake such a transformation is by class struggle, which brings about “root” changes through reorganizing the relations of labor and capital and puts an end to social class. All social differences, such as gender, are the effect of class — the inequality of labor.

FEMINISM AFTER THE “POST” has become in theory and practice largely indifferent to material practices under capitalism — such as labor, which shapes the social structures of daily life — and has fetishized difference. It has, in other words, erased the question of “exploitation,” diffusing knowledge of the root conditions of women’s realities into a plurality of particularities of “oppressions.” Feminism has embraced the cultural turn — the reification of culture as an autonomous zone of signifying practices — and put aside a transformative politics. The revival of a new feminism thus requires clearing out the undergrowth of bourgeois ideology that has limited the terms by which feminism understands the condition of women. A new (Red) Feminism, in short, is not only concerned with the “woman question,” it is even more about the “other” questions that
construct the "woman question": the issues of class and labor constituting the very conditions of knowing — and changing — the root realities of global capitalism.

The present text is grounded in the conviction that canonical feminist understandings of gender and sexuality institutionalized by "post" theories (as in poststructuralism, postcolonialism, postmodernism, postmarxism) are — after one allows for all their local differences and family quarrels (e.g., Benhabib, et al., 1995; Butler, et al., 2000) — strategies for bypassing questions of labor (as in the labor theory of value) and capital (the social relation grounded in turning the labor power of the other into profit) and instead dwell on matters of cultural differences (as in lifestyles). Reclaiming a materialist knowledge, I contest the cultural theory grounding canonical feminism. Specifically, I argue that language — "discourse" in its social circulations — "is practical consciousness" (Marx and Engels, German Ideology) and that culture, far from being autonomous, is always and ultimately a social articulation of the material relations of production. Canonical feminism in all its forms localizes gender and sexuality in the name of honoring their differences and the specificities of their oppression. In doing so, it isolates them from history and reduces them to "events" in performativities, thus cleansing them of labor. For Red Feminism, the local, the specific and the singular, namely the "concrete," is always an "imagined concrete" and the result of "many determinations and relations" that "all form the members of a totality, distinctions within a unity. Production (labor relations) predominates not only over itself . . . but over the other moments as well" (Marx, Grundrisse).

Going against the grain of the canonical theories and instead of making woman "singular," I situate gender and sexuality in the world historical processes of labor and capital. My analysis of gender and sexuality will, predictably enough, be rejected by mainstream feminism as too removed, too abstract, too theoretical and, therefore, a form of exclusion of women as difference. I do not deny difference. I simply do not see difference as autonomous and immanent. Rather, I understand difference as always and ultimately determined by class difference — that is, by relations of property.

In the following sections, I thus critique some of the dominant practices in contemporary cultural theory and map out some of the conditions under which gender and sexuality, abstracted from class
and exploitation, are dematerialized into floating oppressions. I take up questions of language and reference; agency; essentialism and antinessentialism; theory; postmodernity; identity politics; ideology; micro-politics; the desiring subject; the intellectual; totality; labor; class; and what I call “global history,” taking China as exemplary. It is only by burning away this ideological underbrush that Red Feminism can clear the ground to make the root realities of women’s exploitation — as the subject of labor — visible for struggle.¹

The Task of Cultural Theory and Cultural Studies

The task of all knowledges, cultural theory and cultural studies included, is to transform human praxis — to put it on a more complex level. By the term complex I do not mean discursively complicated, or hermeneutically subtle. Rather, by complex I mean the ability to respond to ever more layered, more complicated and more advanced forms of production. Let me explain. No idea by itself (that is, no knowledge, systematic or intuitive) can in any way produce change or transformation in human history. To posit cultural studies as an agent of change by itself is to reinscribe a Hegelian model that regards society as the effect of the movement of ideas. This model is nothing more than an articulation of the hegemonic power of intellectuals.

Knowledge, like all ideas, is part of the superStructural series; it is always a response to developments in the mode of production. Marx goes so far in theorizing such a materialist theory of knowledge that he writes, in his “Preface” to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy: “therefore mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation” (Marx, 1970, 21). In other words, any task that a particular knowledge, whether physics or cultural studies, sets for itself is a task that is demanded by the development of the material relations in culture.

As the material relations become more complex, knowledges become more complex. However, in each society there is a lag between the developments made possible by the forces of production

¹ I have elaborated more fully on these issues in a long interview published in Xie and Wang, 2002.
and the way the wealth produced by the forces of production is distributed. This distribution or this property relation always lags behind the development of the forces of production. The role of progressive and transformative knowledges, in this case cultural studies, is to demystify the sedimented social relations of production and the ways they are putting brakes on the advancing forces of production. To be more specific, the role of cultural studies is to be a transformative agent by examining and, more importantly, explaining, through theoretical analysis, the social relations of production, and how they have become obstacles to the furtherance of the forces of production and the ability of society to meet human needs.

For example, at the present time in the United States, owing to the development of the forces of production, it is possible to provide universal health care for every child, woman and man in the country. In other words, the forces of production have produced a complex system of health care that is able to attend to people’s needs. However, the existing social relations of production, based on class differences — i.e., the priority of profit over need — makes the availability of health care for all an impossibility. Insurance and drug companies, along with other merchants of health, are entitled, according to the existing social relations of production, to profit. Thus, as long as this set of social relations dominates the culture, universal and equitable distribution of health care is impossible, and we are left with millions without health care in the United States.

The role of transformative cultural studies, what I have called “Red Cultural Studies” (see Ebert, 1996; 2001; 2003) is to provide sustained, concrete theoretical analysis of the workings of the relationship between the social relations and the forces of production (in this case, between the actual practices and ideology of the health care industry and its socioeconomic and technological capabilities) in order to produce an integrated theoretical consciousness in people so they can fully grasp the contradictions by which they live: the contradictions, for example, that while health care is potentially available to all in the United States, most people have limited or no access to it. Red Cultural Studies will explain why, and in explaining why, argues, in this case, for example, for the right to a healthy body and decent health care as a fundamental right of citizenship and, through such an argument, turns the citizen into an active agent of history (by further transforming theoretical consciousness into class con-
sciousness), one who works towards different social arrangements — different from the existing social conditions.

**On Mobilizing Counterhegemonic Agency**

Any mobilization of counterhegemonic agency requires that one first theorize “agency” itself. I think there is a tendency in contemporary cultural theory to theorize agency in a rather idealist frame that, in a curious way, is then located in the specificity of situational actions. In other words, contemporary cultural theory argues that all effective actions have a strong local dimension — at times it even claims that this locality is a form of materiality. However, while localizing the subject, it theorizes the subject in an ahistorical — what I call idealist — fashion. It somehow thinks that the subject, by the sheer power of its spontaneous experience, can undertake “human praxis.” In fact, the basis of coalition is this idealist, but localized, subject: a subject that can enter into negotiation (discursive practice) with other subjects and in a collaborative mode bring about change. Change here is always a code word for reform. This notion of agency — local, discursive, coalitionist — is broadly supported by identity politics.

Let me say what I have said in a different way: contemporary cultural theory avoids the question of class — which is the only site of historical agency. It does so by first representing class as a dated view and then proposing, as an updated position, the subject of coalition located in identity politics. We thus end up with a series of subjects: a feminist subject, an African American, a Latino, and a Queer subject. These fragmented subjects — celebrated in Deleuze and Guattari and their followers as nomadic subjects — are all, in my view, masquerading as subjects of agency. I believe that a productive notion of agency has to be highly critique-al of poststructuralist theories of agency which, in the final analysis, substitute life-style practices (informed by identity politics) for class and re-cognize this class-as-life-style as the main axis of human praxis. Obviously at this point I will be critiqued for misrecognizing poststructuralist theory or will be considered to be indifferent to the plight of the marginalized or unaware that class is not the only site of historical agency — that gender, sexuality, race are equally important.

I am not in any way rejecting sexuality, gender or race as sites of struggle, but I do not regard them to be autonomous spaces. Sexuality
becomes a marker of social difference only in a class society. Race is the historical site of racism under capitalism where the cheap labor of the slave, the colonized and the ethnically/racially different immigrant is the mainstay of the rate of profit. In other words, although race, gender and sexuality are indeed spaces of historical agency and sites of social struggle, they become so because of the divisions of labor and property relations (class). Therefore, in a world penetrated by capital the only historical agent is the other of capital — the wage-laborer. Any counterhegemonic agency or human praxis that does not center itself along this contradiction and this class antagonism will produce masquerades of historical agency that might make the upper-middle-class intellectual feel empowered and enabled but will leave the existing social practices intact. To be very clear, the route to social transformation does not pass through coalition — it is firmly centered in revolution.

Identity Politics vs. Historical Materialism

Identity politics is the latest formation of the subject under capitalism. It mostly provides the managerial class (as it has come to be called in bourgeois sociology) with a way of understanding itself that completely bypasses class — or if it runs into class, it understands class in a neo-Weberian sense as life-chances in relation to the market. The managerial class (which is really a class fraction) deploys identity politics to define itself in an idealist fashion that does not put pressure on or threaten the existing social relations of labor. Even when the question of labor cannot be avoided, for example, in discussions of feminism and anti-racist struggles — to take two prominent forms of identity politics — labor becomes mostly a question of jobs and employment, that is to say, of income (e.g., “equal pay”). But as Marxist theory has demonstrated, income, in and of itself, does not determine the relation of the subject of labor to the conflictual structures of labor. Income, to be more precise, can be from profit or from “wages.” It makes a radical difference whether the income is from profit (that is to say, the result of the surplus labor of the other) or from wages (the effect of selling one’s labor power).

When the question of labor has been dealt with in feminism or anti-racism, it has for the most part, been reduced to how to increase
the income of the subject — even the issue of domestic labor has been largely understood in terms of “unpaid labor” and income for housework. Rarely have feminism or anti-racism struggled against the existing labor relations based on the hegemony of capital. The few exceptions to this have been those historical materialist feminists and anti-racists who have engaged the historical constructions of gender, race and sexuality through the division of labor. But this work, especially in the feminism of the 1970s and 80s, was largely cut off by the hegemonic rise of poststructuralism and identity politics.

In fact, identity politics is the space in which the subject acquires a place in social relations through bypassing the fundamental issues involved in labor — the issues, in short, of one’s place in relation to the ownership of the means of production. “Difference” is acquired in identity politics by essentially culturalizing the social divisions of labor. The relation between race, class and gender is obviously a contested one. One arrives at radically different social theories by the way one relates these terms to each other. As a way of grasping this complex linking and interlinking, I will risk some simplification by saying there are two modes of understanding these complex relations.

The poststructuralist mode grants autonomy or at least semiautonomy to each of these categories. In this view race, gender and sexuality have their own immanent logic, which is untranslatable into any other logic. And the relation that they have with each other, to use Althusser’s term, is “overdetermined.” In other words, according to this view, one cannot arrive at a knowledge of sexuality through race, or understand gender through class, etc., without excessive violence being done to the separate terms. Such a theory has spawned numerous books dealing with the internal logic and immanent strategies by which sexuality or race or gender are articulated. Another way of putting this question is that in this paradigm the main issue is how gender works, how race works; this, in effect, makes the macrologic of these relations secondary — the question why gender works the way it does is usually quite marginal.

The other theory, historical materialism, supercedes this theory of autonomy and argues for relating the several categories to each other, not by separate and multiple logics of race, gender and sexuality, etc. but through the single, inclusive logic of wage-labor and capital. Most feminists, anti-racists and queer theorists have been
quick to dismiss materialist theory by saying that the logic of labor cannot explain desire in sexuality, oppression in racism and inequality in gender relations. However, gender, sexuality, and race become social differences only when they become part of the social division of labor, and each has a long and differentiated history as part of the social division of labor and thus as a significant social difference.

Racism, contrary to Foucauldian theory, is not simply a matter of asymmetrical power relations; nor is gender, or sexuality. Homophobia is not simply oppression — the exercise of power by heterosexuals over homosexuals. Gay bashing is the articulation of a violence, that is to say, the effect of power, but it cannot be understood in terms of power without inquiring into the genealogy of power. Contrary to poststructuralist theory, power is not the effect of discourse nor is it simply the immanent condition of all relations. Power is the social and political manifestation of the ownership of the means of production. In other words, power is always generated at the point of production, and its effects should also be examined in relation to the relations of production. Racism, in other words, is not simply oppression (the exercise of power by whites over blacks); sexism is not simply oppression (the exercise of power by men over women). It is true that racism, sexism, and homophobia are experienced by the subject (e.g., African-American, woman, lesbian) as effects of oppression and power. If we limit our inquiry to this experiential level, we will end up simply with ethnographies of power, which I think would be of very limited use. If, however, we go beyond regarding racism, sexism and homophobia as simply effects of power to understand how power is derived from ownership of the means of production, then we will be able to theorize relations of class, gender, race and sexuality in a more historical and materialist way. In this view, sexism, racism and homophobia are not so much instances of oppression but cases of exploitation. This is another way of saying that a poststructuralist theory of the social as the site of multi-oppression practices will not lead to a productive understanding of relations among class, gender, race and sexuality. The more productive way is to place labor relations and their consequences — property relations — at the center of this complex network and understand gender, sexuality, and race as produced by the existing division of labor: that is, as contradictions produced by the fundamental antagonism under capitalism — the antagonism of wage-labor and capital.
The Illusions of Modernism/Postmodernism

Concepts of modernism/postmodernism and modernity/postmodernity are above all spaces of contradiction: they are concepts that have been used to come to terms with the history and shifts in capitalism. It seems to me that as long as we think about capitalism in these terms, we will continue to substitute what is basically a discursive debate for a materialist analysis. Modernity, in other words, is the ensemble of all the conceptual strategies — from science to painting to music to sociology to psychoanalysis — used by the modernist subject to locate itself in the contradictions between wage-labor and capital. There are no ("modernist") styles in isolation from the historical unfolding of wage-labor and capital — from laissez faire capitalism to monopoly capitalism.

To separate modernism and modernity, or for that matter postmodernism and postmodernity, may give the illusion of conceptual clarification and historical location, but it is eventually a species of what Marx and Engels in the *German Ideology* called "combating solely the phrases of this world" (1976, 36) — that is, a politics of phrases. Postmodernity's various forms — in Jameson, in Lyotard, in Butler, in Zizek — are all continuations of the attempt to understand capitalism; all of them are based on what I call the "hearsay" that capitalism has changed: that there has been a fundamental structural change, a "break" in capitalism demanding a new set of conceptual categories to understand the impact of capitalism on culture and society. This view — that a fundamental structural change in capitalism requires us to abandon modernism/modernity — is a recurring theme even for writers like Habermas, who puts a second modernity in place of postmodernity. I believe that the question is neither one of style nor of culture, because both style and culture are eventually the outcome of what I have already designated as the primary contradiction of capitalism: the conflict of wage-labor and capital. It seems to me that contemporary cultural theory would be able to supersede the well-worn categories of modernity/postmodernity, modernism/postmodernism and their rehearsal in Habermas, Eagleton, Jameson, and Butler by returning to the main question. And the main question is capitalism. In place of positing — on the basis of very superficial evidence, such as changes in management style, or increases in the number of people who speculate on the stock market, or the
emergence of cybertechnologies — that capitalism has changed, it is necessary to return to the basic issue: in what way has capitalism changed? Has the capitalism of "modernity" really been transformed into another capitalism (that of postmodernity)? Or does capitalism remain the same regime of exploitation — in which capitalists extract surplus labor from the wage earner? What has changed is not this fundamental factor of property relations but the way that exploitation is articulated. It is not exploitation that has been transformed — and this is the only index of the structure of change — but rather the mode of exploitation has changed. If this simple "fact" is recognized, then the whole debate about modernity/postmodernity, modernism/postmodernism turns out to be simply a politics of phrases.

Using the paradigms of modernity and postmodernity to come to terms with what is essentially the unfolding history of capitalism is not the most effective conceptualization of the issues. To say, for example, that China is modern or postmodern or on the "margins of modernity and postmodernity" is to translate the emerging history of China — with all its immense complexity as well as its complex relations with Europe and the rest of Asia — into a hegemonic and imperialist paradigm. To define China in terms of modernity/postmodernity is to marginalize the relations within China and between China and the rest of Asia, if not the rest of the world.

In dealing with the question of history and the place of the human in history, the determining factor should not be modernity/postmodernity but rather what cuts through the modern and postmodern and places the human in its densely layered and complex history. This relationship — of the human and history — is the relation of labor. The question of the situationality of China, to my mind, is much more effectively answered not by reference to modernity/postmodernity, west or east — these are all annotations of history rather than examinations of it — but by engaging the modalities of labor in China. China is not marginal but exemplary in its entanglement with the history of labor, and it is only through such an entanglement that one can look at its relation to the West. China's history of labor obviously has some resemblance to the history of labor in other parts of the world, including Europe, but at the same time it has its own temporality — its own unevenness. In a sense, I am arguing for delocalizing current theories of history and for building a global history: a
history that is the history of modes of labor (modes of production), and, as such, labor is the global logic of history regardless of the specificity of the site in which this logic unfolds. I take as my text here Marx's writing on India, where he argues for such a global history and refuses the usual liberal pieties about the local and the particular. Liberal pieties mystify the movement of human labor and its formation in capitalism by mis-taking capitalism and Eurocentrism. Eurocentrism is merely a particular form of capitalist imperialism and should be recognized as such.

To see that socialism supercedes the categories of modernity/postmodernity, modernism/postmodernism, one has to examine capitalism, in its most sophisticated and layered forms, with the available forms of socialism, which are — given the historicity of their emergence and the conditions of their survival — not very developed and sophisticated forms of socialism. But even a cursory comparison of the basic human institutions (for example, health care, education, workers' safety and child care) in socialist countries, such as Cuba and China, with similar European and American institutions indicates how Cuba and China, even within their meager resources, have put human needs ahead of profit. This fact — that is, the relation between profit and need and which one is given priority in a given society — is what defines a society and all its cultural forms. If we get to this level of human labor and human need, then we see, I propose, how irrelevant the categories of modernity/postmodernity will become in discussing human history.

*Referentiality: Lost or Transformed?*

Postmodernism does not break free from the referent; rather, it substitutes new modes and forms of reference and referentiality for those notions of the referent that have lost their historical usefulness under capitalism. To be more clear, traditional theories of the relation between language and reality (which have been the core of common notions of the referent and referentiality) were based on what might be called a “Fordist” relation of adequation between signifier and signified. This form of referentiality was more suitable for early industrial capitalism, whose main features were Taylorism in management and the assembly line in production. However, with the
emergence of cybertechnologies — which have brought with them new management techniques, such as plural organization and team management, substituted the post-Taylorist flexible workplace for the old Taylorist management, and opened up the labor force to women, African-Americans, Latinos and other marginalized groups — the mode of representation based on the adequation of signifier to signified has become historically irrelevant. One of the features of the new cybertechnologies is hypertextuality and pluralization of the sign. The sign — which in Fordist industrialism worked to a very large extent on mostly a single level — has suddenly become subject to various forms of doubling and self-referentiality, the effect of which is what Baudrillard calls “simulation” and “simulacra.”

The fact that signs have become plural and the relations between signifier and signified have become relations of relays within relays does not mean the referent is lost. The referent has become plural — it has become more difficult to choose a single referent for a single sign. In place of a single referent, a network of referents — that are in a relationship of playfulness with one another — form the basis for a new theory of referentiality. Like the occlusions of the other “posts” (post-Fordism, postindustrialism, postclass, etc.), I think this postreferential referentiality has reduced the effectivity of language as a weapon of social intervention and has turned it into an object of desire, a site of ludic textuality and signifying play. A new (not post) form of reference is needed. In re-obtaining a more socially effective referent for language, I think the referent will be re-theorized, not so much through the works of Wittgenstein, Austin, Saussure, Derrida, Baudrillard and others, who have subjected language to simply an epistemological critique, but rather through the work of materialist linguists such as Voloshinov. However, Voloshinov himself shows some culturalist lapses, at times, in his own understanding of language. I therefore think that the most productive way of rethinking the question of the referent will be through Capital, specifically chapter 10 of Volume I, in which Marx explicates the working of labor in the working day. In brief, the discussion of the working day provides a very effective frame for establishing a theory of reference in which language is once again put in a relation of materiality to history in the form of labor. The new theory of reference thus will be based on a labor theory of language.
Two Notions of Theory

I see two contesting notions of theory at the moment. One — which I call "ludic theory," that is, theory as play — regards theory to be essentially an ensemble of strategies of textualization, strategies that will demonstrate, through a meticulous rhetorical reading, how concepts that are supposed to secure meaning and give it stability are in fact wavering, errant, tropes. As de Man says in Allegories of Reading, all concepts are a species of writing. He goes so far as to indicate in his The Resistance to Theory and Aesthetic Ideology that textualizing is itself the most material form of theorizing. This ludic notion of theory — theory as textualization and textualization as a resistance against closure — is, of course, the most rigorous form of deconstructing the idea of theory as a positivist practice (theory as a master formulation that will predict and explain the phenomenon in question).

What does challenge theory as textualization (ludic theory) is a materialist theory. However, the very notion of materialism is itself a contested theoretical category for many second-generation post-structuralists, such as Judith Butler and even Slavoj Zizek, for whom materiality is a resistance to the concept: the site of the proliferation of meaning — an excessive play of signification that cannot be contained in any singular interpretation. There is of course a vast difference between Zizek, who posits the material (through a relay of Lacan’s texts) as the “trauma of the real” (1989) and Butler, who proposes the body and its “citationality” — the “performative” (1993) — as the site of ceaseless signification. In spite of these specific differences over where they locate the significatory excess, they all posit materiality as an opposition to Hegelian conceptuality. This ludic notion of materiality, I believe, is itself a rewriting of idealism — at root, all these variations read the material in terms of some form of discourse (meaning). Butler herself, as well as Zizek and a number of other theorists who, following Raymond Williams, call themselves cultural materialists, have tried to minimize this idealism, but their efforts have led (especially in the work of cultural materialists) to what I have called, in various writings, “matterism.” In other words, in an attempt to avoid idealism, they have gone back to a Feuerbachian notion of materialism that mis-takes inert matter as materiality.
In a historical materialist understanding of theory, theory is not a metadiscourse to be applied; instead theory is a historical grasping of social practices in their complex interrelationship. Theory, in other words, is an understanding of social totality. It is a materialist understanding because it grasps the social totality in a materialist way. Of course, the "materialism" of historical materialism is fundamentally different from the de Manian notion of materialism, as well as the Butlerian, Zizekian and culturalist versions. In a historical materialist understanding of theory, materialism is the structure of human labor in its relations to nature and to social totality. In other words, materialism here is neither resistance to conceptuality nor is it inert matter; rather, it is the structure of conflicts in human labor relations. The difficulties, therefore, in "translating," "importing" and "exporting" theory, as I have tried to indicate throughout, are eventually problems of labor. The reason translations of theories become a problem, and their import from one culture to another creates dilemmas, is because the theories in question are idealist formulas, and the characteristic of such idealist formulations is to be always at odds with their host discourses. However, if theory is conceived in a historical materialist way, it is always grasping the social totalities in history and in labor, and history and labor are always connected to what I call a global history. This means theory is complexly connected to diverse cultures that are themselves linked to global history through the structure of their labor practices — such material connections render the tropes of translation, import, and export of very little significance.

_Beyond the "End of Ideology"

In postmodern social theory, especially in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, ideology is seen as undergoing a "break." In their writings, Laclau and Mouffe, through a heavy reliance on Lacan and Althusser, have erased the materialist theory of ideology articulated in Marx and Engels' _The German Ideology_ and more emphatically reiterated in Marx's own _Capital_. In order to dramatize the break, they have reduced the classical Marxist theory of ideology to a simple "false consciousness" and with great fanfare have represented Althusserian and post-Althusserian views as groundbreaking conceptual feats. Ideology after this "break" has become a generalized rep-
representation from which no one can escape and in which everyone is condemned to live their social being. One of the consequences of this notion of ideology, of course, has been its erasure of the rigid clarity of class antagonisms and any other binaries (such as true/false, powerful/powerless, exploitative/emancipatory). This paradox—that in a world in which ideology is one of the fundamental axes of identity and social processes, intellectuals have declared it ended—is caused by the fact that the regime of social relations of production, which the Marxist tradition has explained by the concept of ideology, has not only not ended but instead has intensified its hold on the subject. The most effective way to disentangle the contemporary impasse on ideology is to re-understand the materialist theory of ideology.

Ideology has a very specific and materialist meaning in the Marxist tradition, especially in Marx's Capital (in which, curiously, it has become common to say that the notion of ideology was abandoned by Marx). In various chapters of Capital (especially chapters 1, 6, 9, 10, 11 and 12), Marx explains the process by which the worker exchanges his/her labor-power for wages. In chapter ten he explains the precise mechanism of the working day, during which the worker produces the equivalent of his wages and also surplus labor. In chapter six he theorizes the difference between labor and labor-power and concludes that labor-power is that particular "commodity whose use-value possess the peculiar property of being a source of value, whose actual consumption is therefore itself an objectification of labor, hence a creation of value" (1977, 270). The exchange, he concludes, between the capitalist and the worker is an exchange of labor-power for wages. This exchange is represented in bourgeois theory as a free, unfettered and equal exchange. In fact, at the end of chapter six, Marx makes a point of dwelling on this "free-trader vulgaris" view of the exchange of wages for labor-power; he concludes that it is anything but an equal exchange—it leaves the worker, Marx notes, "like someone who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect but — a tanning" (1977, 280).

The historical materialist concept of ideology seeks to account for the representations of this exchange as an equal and fair exchange. This, I want to emphasize, is the core of the materialist theory of ideology: how the relation between wage-labor and capital is represented as free and equal when it is anything but (it is "a tanning"). False consciousness (the bête noir of postmodern theories of ideology)
is a “struggle concept” (to adopt Maria Mies’ term) by which a materialist understanding marks the consciousness that regards this exchange to be an exchange among equals and conducted in freedom. It is a false consciousness, because it is seen as unfettered and uncoerced when, in fact, as Marx himself argues, this exchange takes place under “the silent compulsion of economic relations” — a compulsion that “sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker” (Marx, 1977, 899). False consciousness is the consciousness that misrecognizes the compulsion of economic relations as free and therefore accepts the exchange of wages for labor-power as equal.

Even a quick look at the post-Althusserian theories of ideology will make clear that, far from being groundbreaking theories, the postmodern notion of ideology is simply an erasure of the materialist theory of ideology and a marginalization of the role of labor. It ends up essentially legitimizing the relation between wage-labor and capital. To say, as postmodern theories of ideology say over and over again, that there is no space outside ideology is to say that it is impossible to mark any relation as a relation of inequality. Because to say that the exchange of wages for labor-power is unequal, according to postmodern theory, is to set up a “true” (i.e., “equal”) relation. This is “wrong,” according to postmodern theory, because it establishes a binary in which a truthful relation masters a false relation. But this is exactly what happens under capitalism. The relation between wage-labor and capital is an unequal relation, and to simply say that drawing attention to its inequality is to fall into binaries is to substitute bourgeois epistemology for social justice. Ideology is not epistemology: to try to make ideology part of epistemology and then deconstruct it through a maneuver in which right and wrong, correct and incorrect, truthful and untruthful are pitted against each other is to simply re-legitimate capitalist relations. The crisis we are witnessing now in the theory of ideology is the crisis of this legitimization of an unjust relation in the discourses of intellectuals who, in their formal theories, declare themselves to be anti-capitalist and friends of the people.

On the Salience of Micropolitics

The emergence of micropolitics marks the impact of the globalization of capitalist production and the way that the dimensions of
this objective reality have become less and less graspable by a subject who, through the working of ideology, has been remapped as the subject of desire. The subject of desire is, by its very formation, a local and localist subject. This desiring subject grasps the world through its identity and furthermore constructs this identity through the satisfactions that it acquires in its consuming relations to the world around it. Micropolitics is the politics of consumption, and consumption is always a matter of localities. Micropolitics does not have an inverse relation to universal objective reality, but rather is complementary to it: it preoccupies the subject with the here and now and, in doing so, distracts its attention from the all encompassing objective reality that in fact determines the here and now. Advanced capitalism deploys micropolitics to restrict the access of the subject to the dynamics of traveling capital and its expanding range of exploitation. It is of course ironic that micropolitics is seen as enabling politics — a politics that attends to the connections and relations of the subject with its immediate conditions and serves as the basis for coalition and other local practices. In fact, micropolitics has become the logic of activism in the new social movements. To say what I have said in a different way: micropolitics is the politics of bypassing class and putting in its place lifestyle and consumption. It is a politics that erases any examination of the structures of exploitation, substituting instead ethnographical studies of the behavior of the subject in its multiple consuming relations.

**Essentialism and Contemporary Cultural Theory**

The move to put essentialism and anti-essentialism at the center of contemporary cultural theory is similar to the move that I described in my discussion of ideology. It is a move to translate social struggle and its materialist understanding into epistemology. Gayatri Spivak’s objection is not so much an objection to whether one should, according to Laclau and Mouffe, be always anti-essentialist as it is an objection to the very logic of such a position. To translate social struggle — which is always over surplus labor — into epistemology is to reiterate a Hegelian move, at the core of which is the explanation of history by ideas rather than by labor. Therefore, any materialist theory that insists on the primacy of labor over ideas, the primacy of materiality over spectrality, is bound to be seen by postmodern theory as
essentialist. To be essentialist it seems, therefore, becomes necessary if one believes that a cultural theory must be rooted, in the final instance, in making sense of human labor. I am, of course, not saying that cultural theory should end here. What I am saying is that cultural theory must always attend to this fundamental human practice, which is the practice of transforming the world through labor. Cultural theory accounts for the way this practice is mediated through innumerable cultural series. To insist that such an accounting should always already be anti-essentialist — that is, to always only deal with specific situationalist practices — is to reify micropolitics and, as I have already described, to cut off the relation between micropolitics and its underlying global logic of production. To put it another way, the postmodern debate on essentialism/anti-essentialism is a debate that eventually aims at severing the relation between the local and the global by positing the global as an essentialist abstraction. This blurs class lines and puts in place of class itself a series of fragmented, seemingly autonomous identities (race, gender, sexuality) — it marginalizes human solidarity, which is based on collective labor practices.

The Role of the Intellectual in Contemporary Cultural Politics

The genealogy of the new intellectual begins with Foucault’s statement in his interview “Truth and Power,” where he contests the notion of the universal intellectual with the idea of the specific intellectual. The specific intellectual, in contrast with the universal intellectual, is one who always works on the micro-level and produces specific knowledges. He does not suffer from the illusion of any grand narratives, such as human emancipation. For Foucault it is unethical to make such grand gestures when one can engage specific issues in specific contexts. In his conversation with Gilles Deleuze, Foucault elaborates on his idea of the intellectual and intellectual practice by stating that the function of such an intellectual is essentially to enable the oppressed to find their voices and to be able to speak for themselves.

The notion of specific intellectual has undergone a number of redefinitions in contemporary theory, and one of its more widely recognized forms is the idea of the new “public intellectual.” By “public intellectual” is meant a person who is able to bridge the gap between academic disciplinary knowledge and larger public concerns.
Both Foucault and contemporary theorists, who, in response to him, have focused on the public intellectual, are of course influenced by Gramsci and his notion of the role of the intellectual. The question of what constitutes an intellectual, it seems to me, is not simply a matter of fixing an identity or prescribing a set of tasks (as Foucault, Gramsci and contemporary theorists all do). The role of the intellectual, I believe, is most clearly marked by the Marxist tradition in which the intellectual — regardless of knowledge affiliation, disciplinary expertise, institutional connections and profession — is the person who always produces a theoretical consciousness. By theoretical consciousness I have in mind Lenin and the broad paraphrase of Lenin in Lukács. Lenin regards this function — the production of a theoretical consciousness — to be so important that he writes that “without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement. This idea cannot be insisted upon too strongly at a time when the fashionable preaching of opportunism goes hand in hand with an infatuation for the narrowest forms of practical activity” (What Is to Be Done). Lenin goes so far as to eliminate the difference between the worker and the so-called intellectual. In a sense, he argues that the worker is an intellectual. Here, of course, Gramsci echoes Lenin when he talks about the role of commonsense and philosophers. I would like to quote here at some length from Lenin’s statement in What Is to Be Done, because it goes beyond the limits of contemporary theory and clarifies the relation of the intellectual and society, the intellectual and the proletariat, and sheds further light on the question of theory itself. Lenin writes that:

This does not mean, of course, that the workers have no part in creating a [socialist] ideology. They take part, however, not as workers but as socialist theoreticians, as Proudhons and Weitlings; in other words, they take part only when they are able, and to the extent that they are able, more or less, to acquire the knowledge of their age and develop that knowledge. But in order that working men [and women] may succeed in this more often, every effort must be made to raise the level of the consciousness of the workers in general; it is necessary that the workers do not confine themselves to the artificially restricted limits of “literature for workers” but that they learn to an increasing degree to master general literature [i.e., theory]. It would be even truer to say “are not confined,” instead of “do not confine themselves,” because the workers themselves wish to read and do read all that is written for the intelligentsia, and only a few (bad) intellectuals believe that it is
enough “for workers” to be told a few things about factory conditions and to have repeated to them over and over again what has long been known. (1988, 107.)

As a feminist, my invoking Lenin’s concept of intellectual here may seem quite counterproductive, given the extreme antagonism of feminism to Lenin. I thus think it is very necessary to take a moment here to address the relation of feminists, sexual theorists and Lenin. It is by now a cliché among feminists and sexual theorists to consider Lenin the bête noire of patriarchal oppressors. This common antagonistic disdain for Lenin comes, I believe, both from the widespread demonization of Lenin in bourgeois ideology and from a very basic and widely circulated misreading of Lenin by feminists — most notably of two of his letters to Inessa Armand (Lenin, 1974). These letters are commonly taken as proof of Lenin’s oppressive patriarchal and puritanical indifference to women’s concerns and sexuality: specifically the issue of “freedom of love” and his direct suppression of feminist intellectual work — Armand’s proposed pamphlet for proletarian women on love, marriage and the family. But this reading of Lenin is quite ahistorical — it ignores the actual historical situation of Armand’s work and Lenin’s writing — and is blind to the fundamental erasure of class and the bourgeois bias in feminism itself. Lenin is raising here the very basic question of class that feminists and sexual theorists, in nearly all their forms, have largely suppressed — what Lenin calls the “objective logic of class relations in affairs of love” (1974, 39) as opposed to “subjectively” understanding “love” and sexuality as Armand and most feminists propose. Lenin critiques the notion of “freedom of love” by enumerating a series of materialist understandings of the concept against the prevalent bourgeois notions dominant in the “top-prominent classes” (1974, 38–39). He then argues that it will be the dominant bourgeois ideology that will prevail, resulting in misinterpretations of Armand’s argument. In short, he is not suppressing Armand’s project but critique-ally supporting it and, through a patient pedagogy, attempting to help Armand protect her project from the reality of bourgeois distortions that will “tear out of it phrases . . . [to] misinterpret you” (1974, 42) — that is, misinterpret the class distinctions and objective class realities of the conditions of sexuality as well as misinterpret the material needs of proletarian women for sexuality free from material constraints, as opposed
to bourgeois demands for the exercise of desire free from moral constraints. This is a distinction that continues to be lost on feminist and sexual theorists today, and the continued antagonism toward Lenin's patient, but critique-al, pedagogy, says considerably more about feminist intellectuals' own inability to engage critique and the class limits of their own understanding than it does about Lenin.

**Pragmatism, Totalization, Totality**

The question of totality, today, is either rejected in the name of pragmatism or turned into a notion of totalization. For many, totalization is not the issue — it is seen as an unavoidable aspect of theory. What matters are the purposes totalization is made to serve. But if we have to evaluate totalization purely in terms of its consequences ("the purposes it is made to serve"), we repeat pragmatism and its various narratives that truth is what works. If we accept such an operational definition of truth then it will become even more difficult to argue for a post-capitalist society that would be inclusive in its economic access and its political and cultural freedoms. In other words, a pragmatist approach to truth — which I see as basically behind the proposition that totalization should be judged by its consequences — will return us back to what I described in my discussion of ideology as a misrecognition of the relation of labor and capital. A pragmatist approach would have to say that such a relation is acceptable and truthful because, on the practical level, it works. It seems to me that any theorization of totalization has to be very critique-al of such pragmatism and its various versions in postmodern theory. The version of pragmatism that I just paraphrased is one developed most notably by Richard Rorty. But in his *Just Gaming* and the *Differend*, Lyotard also puts forth a version of pragmatist social theory. Lyotard's social theory takes as its point of departure his closing statement in *The Postmodern Condition*: "Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable" (1984, 82). The Lyotardian anti-totality social theory eventually leads to a notion of indeterminate judgement, that is to say, a judgement that is not based on any foundation of truth. This Lyotardian theory becomes the paradigm of postmodern jurisprudence in which justice is separated from truth because truth is by definition a totalization and justice has to attend to the "differend" — the "unpresentable" and the untranslatable.
In contrast to a Rortian anti-totality pragmatism and the Lyotardian "differend" (judgement without truth), I think a more productive way to deal with totality is to go back to Lukács — a Lukács whose Hegelian idealism one should be very careful about. Lukács argues, in *History and Class Consciousness*, that bourgeois thought is by its very constitution detotalized and detotalizing: it is a fragmentary mode of knowing. This fragmentary consciousness he calls, in a rather idealist way, "false consciousness." However, my point here is not to critique the way Lukács theorizes false consciousness, but rather to focus on what he proposes as the *other* of bourgeois thought: "concrete analysis," which means "the relation to society as a whole" (1983, 51).

Totality is far from being an abstraction that forgets about specific differences (which is after all the charge postmodernism levels at totality) — it is a concrete recognition of the diverse relations that produce the social. However, as Lukács insists and, of course, as Marx himself indicated in his "Introduction" to the *Grundrisse*, the concrete of the totality is not identical with the empirical and the individual; this is the concrete which, "is a concentration of many determinations, hence a unity of the diverse" (1993, 101). For Lukács it is only by arriving at knowledge of society as a whole that it "becomes possible to infer the thoughts and feelings which men would have in a particular situation if they were able to assess both it and the interests arising from it in their impact on immediate action and on the whole structure of society" (1983, 51).

If the purpose of cultural theory is to come to terms with not only the structures of cultural relations but also the "thoughts and feelings," it needs to overcome its postmodern reluctance and rigorously theorize the totality which in fact encompasses and informs particularity. Far from being the master-monster that it is made to be in contemporary theory, totalizing is a historical grasping of the concrete in its diverging and divergent relations: it is a dialectical reinscription of the abstract and the concrete, the local and the global, the particular and the general.

It is this historical grasping of the concrete of labor that grounds Red Feminism.

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