MATERIALIST FEMINISM

A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women’s Lives

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Feminism and the Ends of Postmodernism

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1. The relationship to the social world is not the mechanical causality between a "milieu" and a consciousness, but rather a sort of ontological complicity. When the same history inhabits both habitus and habitat, both dispositions and position, the king and his court, the employer and his firm, the bishop and his see, history in a sense communicates with itself, is reflected in its image. (Bourdieu 1981, 306)

This essay deals with constellations of relationships that have largely been overlooked during the process of feminism's arduous trek into the university. In what follows, I trace a set of homologies that exist among and between postmodernism, feminism, and the larger political context to illustrate what Bourdieu describes as "ontological complicity" (but what might also be defined as "ideology" in Marx's sense of a distortion of real contradictions). The main tendency I will discuss is a correspondence among postmodernist social theory, the postmodernist turn in feminism, and the wider sphere of political debate.

Because the terms I use in this argument have been unnecessarily complicated and mystified, I want to briefly define the following at the outset: socialism, historical materialism, and postmodernist social theory. In the first, socialism describes an organized political movement at the center of which is the concept that the relations of production structure social life, that the exploitative character of capitalism is the root of social and political oppression, and that the proletariat will serve as the agent of revolutionary social change. In terms of class, under capitalism, society is divided antagonistically into a ruling class, which owns the means of production, and a working class, those who must sell their labor power in order to survive. The middle class in the U.S. are those workers who do not own the means of production, but for whom certain advantages (i.e., economic, institutional, cultural) do exist. Gramsci's theory of hegemony—primarily concerned
with the issue of consent—mainly addresses such a middle class, for in order to give consent, one must be convinced that one will receive certain rewards, however slight. While in the more prosperous Cold War era university professors occupied a privileged, solidly middle-class position, the profession is presently much more divided. A class of more privileged workers—those with tenure or tenure-stream positions who have modest teaching loads and institutional privileges—still exists, but the number of part-time, adjunct, and contingent workers with heavy teaching loads, no job security (many of them have only annual contracts), and very little institutional privilege is increasing.

By postmodernist social theory, I mean the work of those theorists who subscribe to the belief that, in the last portion of the twentieth century, politics can exist only through the necessarily fragmented, divided, and contentious identities through which people think themselves; and that the only similarity among such groups is their struggle—from very different positions and in isolation from one another—against an amorphous and ill-defined category known as "power." For example, against the Marxist centrality of class struggle and in an ironic if unintentional mirroring of the mercurial nature of capitalism, Michel Foucault argues: "But if it is against power that one struggles, then all those who acknowledge it as intolerable can begin the struggle wherever they find themselves and in terms of their own activity (or passivity)" (1977, 216). Following Neil Lazarus (1991) and Christopher Norris (1990, 1992), I use the term "postmodernist social theory" to designate those critical theories that rely upon an uncritical and idealist focus on the discursive constitution of the "real," a positivistic approach to the notion of "difference" (one that does not consider the divisiveness of such differences), and a marked lack of critical attention to the context of capitalism and academics' locations within capitalist processes of production and reproduction.

Unless one resorts to reified notions of objectivity and intellectual autonomy, it is difficult to see how postmodernist social theorists and feminists could make arguments about the discursive constitution of reality, the primacy of discourse, and the possibilities of fragmentation at a time in which conditions in the U.S. were growing more repressive in all too material ways. A grim irony inheres in the fact that as capitalism's attacks on the working class, the poor, and social programs intensify, at a time when the division of wealth is deepening, intellectuals discover that the economy is really discursively constructed, and that class position no longer matters. Why, at this point in history, did postmodernist social theory become popular within the academy? Why did arguments against class as a category of analysis emerge at a point when class divisions were growing?

In order to address these questions, we must first acknowledge that intellectuals are not autonomous from larger political, ideological, and economic contexts. In other words, we receive much of our information about the world in the same way others do: through the mass media. Issues and topics in academic fields do not emerge fully formed from our heads, but frequently emerge from conflicts within academic fields produced and structured by larger fields of cultural and political production. Second, we must understand that the ways in which we process this information are structured by institutional training and position. Feminists have criticized educational institutions such as law and medicine for their powerful ability to shape subjects' attitudes, investments, and behaviors. Indeed, it is easier to see how scientific institutions function in oppressive ways, since the material effects of scientific theories are more visible than the ideological effects of philosophical or social theories. But like any institution, those
educated in the humanities—if they are to succeed in the field—must also internalize the rules of the game as well as certain received categories of thought and behavior. In short, we inherit and reproduce certain classificatory schema that in turn delineate the contours of our own understandings.

II. In order to exist or develop, this society not only needs certain relationships of production, exchange, and communication, but it also creates a certain set of intellectual relations within the framework of contradictory class interests. (Luxemburg 1976, 253)

In France, postmodernist social theory responded to the perceived hegemony of Marxist political analysis. Imported into the U.S., it gained a different material context while maintaining the original outline of its anti-Marxist critique. Both postmodernism and, as we shall see, feminism, entered into intellectual debates specific to European contexts, thus obscuring the historical and material conditions that produced these debates. In a kind of phantom-limb syndrome, a backlash against economic analyses was appropriated by a society whose history of class struggle has been consistently repressed.

Although U.S. feminists remain suspicious of the work of French postmodernists such as Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, the postmodernist social theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) has had a profound—if frequently unacknowledged—impact on theory in the U.S. Lyotard and Baudrillard's visions tend toward the more fatal—John Clarke claims that the conclusion to Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* contains one of "the saddest passages in postmodernist writing" (33), and one can only read Baudrillard’s reference to the oppositional potential of the "silent apathy of the masses" as just short of overt despair. In contrast, the popularity of Laclau and Mouffe in the U.S. results at least in part from their optimism about the political potential of "radical democracy."

The postmodernist social theory laid out in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) has had a major influence on feminist arguments in the U.S., heightening tendencies toward abstraction within feminist theory and legitimizing already existing arguments against historical materialism as a method and class as a category of analysis. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe argue that the Marxist concept of class is essentialist. Calling for radical democracy based on reformist premises, they view the main impediment to "radical democratic politics" as "essentialist apriorism, the conviction that the social is sutured at some point, from which it is possible to fix the meaning of any event independently of any articulatory practice" (1990, 17). In place of the "essentialist apriorism" of the proletariat as the class that "has to bear all the burdens of society without enjoying its advantages" (Marx and Engels 1976, 94)—and in opposition to any conceptualization of capitalism as a system—Laclau and Mouffe argue for the practice of "articulation." Articulation, they claim, is

the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning ... the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity. (1985, 113)

Articulatory practices, which "take place not only within given social and political spaces, but between them" (140), thus replace alliances previously forged with subordinated classes and through political struggle.
Laclau and Mouffe wish to dispense with the Marxist premise that the proletariat will form the agency for revolutionary social change. However, they do not dispense with the notion of agency altogether; rather, they perform a bait-and-switch act. In place of the revolutionary proletariat and indeed any notion of revolution, Laclau and Mouffe smuggle in a new agent for reformist struggles. Laclau and Mouffe conclude:

To the extent that the resistance of traditional systems of difference is broken, and indeterminacy and ambiguity turn more elements of society into "floating signifiers," the possibility arises of attempting to institute a centre which radically eliminates the logic of autonomy and reconstitutes around itself the totality of the social body. (1985, 186)

Thus, despite their insistence that the centrality of class in Marxist analyses is essentialist, they recognize the need for some form of centrality, some "new" center. Within the context of Laclau and Mouffe's argument, it seems clear that—however implicit the claim—articulation and articulatory practices can best be done by those trained in the nuances of discourse and discursivity: namely, intellectuals. "Social relations," Laclau and Mouffe tell us, "are discursively constructed":

Synonymy, metonymy, metaphor are not forms of thought that add a second sense to a primary, constitutive literality of social relations; instead, they are part of the primary terrain itself in which the social is constituted. (110)

In place of the so-called privileging of class (and here it seems revealing that in the United States, the only place where class may be said to be centralized is within marginalized Marxist analyses in the academy and even more marginalized socialist organizations), we find the privileging of intellectuals and intellectual activity. This is, of course, a convenient move for intellectuals since it means that (a) since the concept is intrinsically essentialist, we can jettison the category of class and the contradictions it introduces into our own work; (b) we do not need to concern ourselves with our own class positions, since oppressions are, within the discursive field, necessarily unfixed and somehow equivalent; and (c) we do not have to participate in class struggle since, as Ellen Meiksins Wood puts it, we have put "intellectual activity in place of class struggle" (1995, 10).

Laclau and Mouffe are consistent in their argument that Marxism "privileges" class in ways that marginalize or ignore the oppression of social groups not constituted economically: predominantly middle-class movements, such as feminism, environmentalism, antinuclear activism, and lesbian and gay rights. In the U.S., the category of race presents the main challenge to Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discursive equivalences and antieconomicity—a category about which they are noticeably silent. For one cannot consider race in the U.S. without confronting the increasing immiseration of African Americans, Latinos, and immigrants in the U.S., the overt state repression against communities of color and immigrants, and the racist rhetoric used to legitimize such atrocities. Further, when race and (necessarily) class are introduced into the analysis, it becomes difficult to make arguments for the "openness of the social."

Michele Barrett, a recent convert to postmodernist social theory, does not offer an uncritical endorsement of Laclau and Mouffe in The Politics of Truth, but she does claim that:
Barrett mentions that this “radical new theorisation of politics, in which the iconic factor of class is dramatically shifted from its privileged position” would be attractive “to many people,” but she stops short of theorizing why this radical new theorization is so attractive, as well as who it would attract. In addition, her categorizations—“gender, ethnicity, or age”—reproduce Laclau and Mouffe’s elision of race and class.

Barrett’s admittedly partial solution, in keeping with Foucault, is to replace the Marxist concept of “the economics of untruth” with “the politics of truth” (1991, 140). Ironically, her central critique of Laclau and Mouffe is that they are too Marxist. She would prefer a more Foucauldian, and even less deterministic model of power relations, suggesting that issues of determinism and materiality can be shelved. Barrett asks, “It remains to be seen, however, how far Hegemony and Socialist Strategy really does carry though its iconoclastic project of the complete dismantling of class privilege” (74). This “iconoclastic project of the complete dismantling of class privilege” does pose an important, if unintentional, question. Where Barrett means the privileging of class within Marxist political analyses, I want to read this question against her grain. Whose class privilege is “dismantled” by Laclau and Mouffe’s argument? When transplanted onto a U.S. context, what does it mean to dismantle a category whose very existence has been routinely denied? Finally, isn’t this dismantling of class privilege itself an effect of class position and consequently enabled by many academics’ distance from economic necessity?

III. The class that has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. (Marx and Engels 1976, 64)

The idealist turn in postmodernist social theory finds its counterpart within anti-essentialist feminist theory. Just as postmodernists argue that “the real” no longer refers to concrete, objective reality, the anti-essentialist critique within feminism has dissolved the political category of women (and however problematic this category was, it was at least a political one) into a “discursive” construct. At a time when feminists of color had begun to criticize the use of women as a category of analysis, the important questions raised by their critiques of the invisibility of race and class were deferred by the anti-essentialist claim that identity was discursively constructed, bodies were discursively produced, and class was a totalizing fiction. Intersections between anti-essentialist feminism and postmodernist social theory run throughout much feminist theory in the 1980s, but are abundantly evident in the influential work of Judith Butler. In order to illustrate this relationship, I want to look at Butler’s “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism,” published in Feminists Theorize the Political, because it more explicitly elaborates theoretical investments that are otherwise implicit in her work.
Defending a theory of the social as contingent and foundations as a hegemonic fiction, the essay is a critique of critiques of postmodernism. According to Butler, "The chant of antipostmodernism runs, if everything is discourse, then is there no reality to bodies?" (1992, 17). Following Laclau and Mouffe, Butler proposes

a distinction between the constitution of a political field that produces and naturalizes that constitutive outside and a political field that produces and renders contingent the specific parameters of that constitutive outside. (20; original emphases)

Like most defenses of an a priori, discursive realm, Butler does not identify those forces intent on toppling critiques of the subject, although her references to foundationalism, totality, and universalizing make it clear that at least one of these antipostmodernist critiques issues from a Marxist perspective. Criticisms of postmodernist social theories are accordingly dismissed as gestures of "conceptual mastery" (5), "an authoritarian ruse by which political contest . . . is summarily silenced" (4), and "paternalistic disdain" (3).

The theory that Butler advances promotes a belief that discourse precedes, structures, and limits subject formation. The point, she claims, most powerfully made by postmodernists and poststructuralists (and since Butler does not identify the first, it is to be assumed that critiques of postmodernist social theories are identical with critiques of poststructuralism) is "that recourse to a position that places itself beyond the play of power, and which seeks to establish the metapolitical basis for a negotiation of power relations is perhaps the most insidious ruse of power" (Butler 1992, 6). That the first does not necessarily follow from the second is inconsequential to Butler's argument, because the establishment of any organized material basis for politics is precisely the object of her critique.

Since the subject is constructed by politics and power prior to its material constitution, or rather its "intelligibility" (Butler 1992, 17) as material, the political goal for Butler is to intervene at the level of this discursive construction by "reworking that very matrix of power by which we are constituted, of reconstituting the legacy of that constitution, and of working against each other those processes of regulation that can destabilize existing power regimes" (13). It is, Butler claims, "only through releasing the category of women from a fixed referent that something like 'agency' becomes possible" (16).

While Butler does not provide examples of antipostmodernist critiques, she does offer an example of what happens when unquestioned foundations are accepted: the Persian Gulf War, which served "not merely to destroy Iraqi military installations, but also to champion a masculinized Western subject" (Butler 1992, 10). This is a curious example indeed, for it implies that a social and political theory committed to contesting economic injustice (Marxism)—a theory that explicitly positions itself against capitalism—performs the same authoritarian operations as a war waged in the interests of capitalism itself. Moreover, it flattens out very real power differentials and constitutes, as Wood puts it, "a kind of self-promotion of intellectuals as world-historic forces" (1995, 10).

The consideration of discourse as constitutive of materiality, the conflation of "discursive ordering" and "material violence" (Butler 1992, 17), and the belief that contingent signifying acts produce material bodies simply are not viable strategies for oppositional politics. In the end, Butler's theory of "politics as such" (4) runs aground on the usual Foucauldian reef. Stuart Hall observes of Foucault that he "saves for himself 'the political' with his insistence on power, but he denies himself a politics because he has no idea of the 'relations of force'" (1986, 49). Similarly, Butler's text ignores that
the institutions productive of subjects and the history of these institutions are based on relations of force and ideologies that maintain and reproduce antagonistic class relations. Ultimately, Butler's theory of the political precludes political action, because the site for intervention is purely discursive:

To deconstruct the concept of matter or that of bodies is not to negate or refuse either term. To deconstruct these terms means, rather, to continue to use them, to repeat them, to repeat them subversively, and to displace them from the contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power. (1992, 17)

In this way, Butler's work enacts the very authoritarian and authoritative ruse that she seeks to avoid: society (now replaced by "the social") is unfixed, and politics (now replaced by "the political") are of necessity limited to idealist and discursive interventions performed by intellectuals.

Consequently, Butler's jettisoning of materiality and her inattention to class position and historical context prioritizes the political interests of particular constituencies (namely, academics), while others (whose interests are not so easily represented within this context) are again marginalized. A related problem appears in a "conversation" in Conflicts in Feminism (1990) among Jane Gallop, Marianne Hirsch, and Nancy Miller. The primary topic, and to a minor degree the source of dissension, involves the participants' feelings about critiques of feminism made by feminists. Particularly salient to my argument is their identification of certain conflicts within feminism and the way such identifications work to isolate feminism in terms of race and class.

Gallop, Hirsch, and Miller see the central conflict within feminism as a discursive one that operates in relative isolation from economic or historical contexts. As a result, feminism exists only within the institutional boundaries of the academy, and feminist interests are reducible to questions of "power" and tenure. The sole form of power to which they lay claim is power over female graduate students and untenured female professors. Yet their claim to being "women" permits them to stress their alleged marginality. As Hirsch puts it, "we never really feel in power. It is important for tenured feminists to articulate that, as difficult as it may be for younger feminists to hear" (Gallop et al. 1990, 355). What their feelings have to do with the all-too-real power differentials between tenured and untenured faculty (be they female or male) goes unacknowledged.

At one point, Gallop raises the context of the conservative political climate only to rein it back into the limited sphere of the academy: "In the world, women are not powerful and feminism isn't doing well and abortion is about to become illegal, etc. There is all this stuff to support one's sense that one is still simply oppressed" (Gallop et al. 1990, 355). Gallop, who tends to be precise elsewhere, becomes vague around the relationship between "the world" (where feminism isn't doing well, etc.) and "her world" (where there is all this stuff). In other words, her argument lapses into vagueness around the very issues that would challenge her "sense that one is still simply oppressed."

Ellipses caused by the absence of economic context, or any concession to the belief that "society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand" (Marx 1978, 247), become even more dramatic when the conversation turns to race. Here the tendency is to address a lengthy and complicated history of racism through a pluralist logic of "inclusion." One of the
issues raised is the fact that *The Poetics of Gender* (1986), an anthology edited by Miller, did not include writings by women of color; another is that women of color were not invited to a particular conference. Speaking of the addition of a chapter on “race” to her most recent book, Miller observed:

> As powerful as my fear of not finishing [the book] is, it was not as strong as my wish for McDowell’s approval. For McDowell, whom I do not know, read black feminist critic. I realize that the set of feelings that I used to have about French men I now have about African-American women. Those are the people I feel inadequate in relation to and try to please in my writing. (1986, 363–64)

The displacement of French men by African American women is problematic enough on its own; but then Miller proceeds to attribute the larger problem to “political correctness” because, she asserts, her experience of writing about race suggested that “it created more problems than it solved.” Among the disturbing aspects of this conversation—and I would argue that it is a problem that follows from tendencies existing within postmodernist social theory—is the way in which class and race are replaced by reference to more “fluid” categories of identity. Although this text departs from the stylistic vagaries and more esoteric level of argumentation characteristic of postmodernist social theory, it ultimately enacts similarly abstract moves: a preoccupation with intellectual production that excludes historical and economic contexts, recourse to vaguely defined relations of power that exclude material relations of force, and a resultant narrowing of the field of intellectual vision.

IV. One of the great advantages of America is that Americans have no memory. The reason I left Europe was because there’s such a long memory that you can’t initiate change. But Americans have no memory at all. I’m convinced an American workforce can come into work on Monday morning and find the whole production line has changed and by coffee break they’re used to the new environment. Americans, unlike, say, the Japanese, are used to change. Most other countries are not. Americans are uniquely adapted to change. Change is the way we can win. (Will Corrigan, Executive, LSI Logic, in Davidow and Malone, 1992)

In order to clarify the relationship between intellectual production and the larger political and economic context, I want to examine an incident that garnered enormous media attention during the 1992 presidential campaign: Dan Quayle’s speech on “family values.” I turn to this speech because of the ways in which it reflected attention from the current economic crisis to another crisis, discursive and abstract, a rhetorical practice also at work in Robert Dole’s recent critiques of mainstream Hollywood films. Quayle’s speech, excerpts of which were published in newspapers nationwide and repeatedly highlighted on television, was made in response to the Los Angeles uprising and played a part in Republicans’ attempts to efface problems of racism and economic injustice (a move to which the Democrats implicitly consented). Quayle rendered the crisis in these terms:

> Right now the failure of our families is hurting America deeply. When families fail, society fails. The anarchy and lack of structure in our inner cities are testament to how quickly civilization falls apart when the family foundation cracks.

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Quayle's speech began by referring to the "terrible problem" of racism in the United States, but claimed that the "landmark civil rights bill of the 1960s removed legal barriers to allow full participation by blacks in the economic, social and political life of the nation." According to Quayle, "By any measure the America of 1992 is more egalitarian, more integrated and offers more opportunities to black Americans and all other minority group members than the America of 1964." The rhetoric that Quayle mobilized has a lengthy racist history. Despite his claims to progress and among a series of blatant lies, Quayle resorted to a conservative rhetoric dating back at least to Daniel Moynihan's 1965 report, The Negro Family. In that report, Moynihan claimed that the problems plaguing inner-city residents could be reduced to a single, isolated factor: a family structure "which, because it is so out of line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole."

In 1986, CBS aired Bill Moyers's special, The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America, which reworked the message contained in Moynihan's earlier report: economic problems in America's inner cities have been solely caused by single mothers and absent or otherwise irresponsible fathers. Moyers's purpose resembles both Moynihan's and Quayle's: to duck the question of how people can support themselves and their communities in the absence of an economic base. In 1992, Quayle's appeal to this discursive crisis surgically removed attention from the material circumstances in which people struggle to survive. Families, he pontificates, have failed. It is never a matter of how—in terms of health care, day care, employment, housing—the system has abandoned and failed its constituents. In the aftermath of the Los Angeles uprising, this is precisely the sort of diversionary tactic so urgently sought by both conservatives and liberals to disguise their incapacity and lack of will concerning issues of race.

Both television and newspaper coverage of Quayle's speech originally contextualized the speech, quoting Quayle as claiming that a "poverty of values" caused the Los Angeles uprising. The day after Quayle's speech, in fact, the New York Times ran a front-page story entitled "Quayle Says Riots Sprang from Lack of Family Values." On the following day, the New York Times reported that

Thailand is in turmoil, the Federal deficit is ballooning and hot embers of racial resentment still smolder in the ruins of inner-city Los Angeles. But today the high councils of government were preoccupied with a truly vexing question: Is Murphy Brown a tramp? (Wines J 1992, A1)

Why did subsequent attention to Quayle's argument center around this single sentence referring to a fictional television character? "It doesn't help matters when prime time TV has Murphy Brown—a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid, professional woman—mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone and calling it just another 'life style choice'" (Quayle 1992, A20).

The logic that links the Los Angeles uprising, Dan Quayle's speech, and intellectual production lies in the emphasis on language and abstract definitions or categories and how this emphasis is used to displace attention from material concerns. In the aftermath of Quayle's speech, many feminists took on the task of defending a sitcom character's right to parent, winding up in a much publicized squabble over definitions of what counts as a family. In this case, feminism seems to function dangerously like trickle-down economics, since how these representations of family values affect women
in socioeconomic positions other than those of the more privileged and educated middle classes was ignored during the *Murphy Brown* controversy. When writer/producer Diane English accepted an Emmy award for the show, she thanked "all the single parents out there who, either by choice or necessity, are raising their kids alone. Don't let anybody tell you you're not a family." On the season premiere of *Murphy Brown* (September 1992), Murphy paraphrased English's earlier remark. Surrounded by "families," she said: "Perhaps it's time for the Vice President to expand his definition and recognize that whether by choice or circumstance families come in all shapes and sizes."

Two points are worth drawing attention to in these statements. First, there's the underlying belief in a particularly American form of pluralism, which resembles arguments made by postmodernist social theorists. Here, Laclau and Mouffe's argument about pluralism has followed a politically reactionary trajectory, for—as Elizabeth Spelman (1988) has pointed out—pluralism always has a center defined by dominant economic interests. Thus, the solution to conservative appeals to "traditional" family values is merely to expand the definition of what constitutes a family without addressing the manner in which this highly particularized and racist version of "family" serves as a scapegoat for an economic crisis.

The second point concerns the equivalence of the terms "choice" and "circumstance," and the underlying notion that those who can afford to choose single parenthood and those who have no choice but to parent alone confront the same or similar problems. The rhetoric of choice, as in "whether by choice or necessity," implies that such choices are uniformly available to women. The choices afforded Murphy and the constituency she represents are choices enabled by economic advantage and cultural capital. The reality is that a vast majority of single parents in the United States—most of them are women—raise their children in a society that has in effect abandoned them. Unlike more privileged women, these women cannot afford day care (not to mention in-home day care), nor can many afford health care. The belief that the solution to the problem is to adjust or expand the definition of what counts as a family—to intervene at the level of discursive constructions—without working toward material changes as well, operates through a very abstract and ultimately ineffectual form of politics.

By not discussing the intertwined contexts of race and economics, the response to Quayle's speech further ceded any discussion of class privilege to the right. The program and its producers, Quayle could claim, are "out there in the world of comfort. They ought to come with me out to where the real America is." White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater endorsed Quayle's comments about the "poverty of values," saying, "The glorification of the life of an unwed mother does not do good service to most unwed mothers who are not highly paid, glamorous anchorwomen." The claim that feminists were "glorifying" single parenthood is not far from the mark, given the economic circumstances enjoyed by the fictitious Murphy Brown. In the end, the erosion of the Los Angeles uprising in the *Murphy Brown* incident moved the debate away from issues of race, the plight of inner cities, and the deteriorating economic base in the United States, to a much safer, symbolic ground. By shifting the debate from the material conditions of inner cities to the discursive field of "family values," both parties occupied a familiar and comfortable terrain for debate.

Why has this particular context been erased? Why should it matter to feminism? To answer these questions, we need to return to the reasons postmodernism and anti-
essentialist feminism converged to spawn in the fertile ground of U.S. academic production, where the fragmentation celebrated by postmodernist social theorists and the retreat from an understanding of the economic structuring of various debates continue to work in specifically divisive ways. I want to briefly sketch out four sites where the ideology of postmodernism converges with dominant ideologies in the United States: (1) anti-empiricist tendencies within the humanities; (2) the logic of consumerism and consumer capitalism; (3) postmodernism and the legacy of anti-communism; and (4) anti-organizational bias and individualism.

In terms of the first, postmodernism gave added momentum to a strong social constructionist version of reality already implicit in the largely qualitative, interpretive methods of humanities research. I am not endorsing a strong empiricist position, but rather suggesting that the postmodernist rejection of foundations, representation, empirical research, and any attempt at working toward objective understandings of political reality undermined our ability to speak on behalf of progressive issues and causes, much less to speak intelligibly about political issues. To a large extent, this led to a mystification of the very political issues that most desperately needed to be demystified for ourselves, our communities, our colleagues, and our students. In fact, postmodernism replicates the workings of contemporary political debate in the U.S.: both refuse to confront political realities and both operate at a level of abstraction that bears little relation to the realities experienced by ordinary people on a daily basis.

Second, consumer capitalism itself has produced what postmodernist social theorists view as the potentially liberating proliferation of identities in contemporary culture—the marketing of feminist, environmentalist, and lesbian or gay lifestyles bears out this point. To speak about "identity" politics is to buy into consumerist ideologies and to suggest that identities (not to mention politics) can be as easily adopted and discarded as clothes off the rack. Rather than viewing the fragmentation and proliferation of identities as a symptom of the failure of Marxism or as cause for political optimism, we need to consider how the globalization of capitalism as a world system and shifts in the flow of capital have in fact produced the very effects (market segmentation, niche marketing, narrowcasting, and the commodification of lifestyles) we wish to claim as oppositional strategies.

Third, Neil Larsen has suggested that "postmodern philosophy and political theory becomes objectively, albeit perhaps obliquely, a variation of anti-communism" (1990, 15). In the wake of the Cold War, postmodernism has replaced right-wing anti-communist ideologies. The very language used by postmodernist social theory and feminism to dismiss Marxism suggests this connection: "totalitarian," "authoritarian," and "a ruse of power." While intellectuals might fancy themselves beyond the reach of such ideologies, it remains the case that those intellectuals who identify themselves as members of an explicitly socialist organization are subject to red-baiting (i.e., they teach politics rather than intellectual matter, they use classrooms as recruiting sites, and so on), intellectual suspicion and disdain, and frequently marginalization within their discipline. For those with no experience within Marxist or socialist organizations (and even for some with a certain amount of such experience), anti-communist ideologies continue to permeate understandings of how these organizations function.

The fourth point is a byproduct of these anti-communist tendencies. In the U.S., people are socialized as passive consumers of organizations rather than active participants in the building and democratic functioning of institutions. I think it's accurate to say that postmodern theory becomes a variation of anticomunism.
say that most people in the U.S. view political organizations with suspicion and distrust. Although suspicion is in order with regard to mainstream political organizations, political organizations outside the mainstream bear the brunt of hostility. They are perceived as "cults" or sites of brainwashing, conversion, or ideological indoctrination (ostensibly, the university system is outside such processes). To join an explicitly socialist organization is to lose one's precious individuality and to be viewed as the Borg of Star Trek: The Next Generation—as part of a mindless hive, incapable of uttering anything but the chilling words—"You will be assimilated." Ironically, postmodernist social theorists and feminists are willing to find resistance in the most banal and inconsequential media texts, but when it comes to socialist organizations, they see no agency, but only mindless conformity.

Anti-organizational bias is part and parcel of the postmodernist package. To organize any but the most provisional and spontaneous coalitions is, for postmodernist social theorists and feminists alike, to reproduce oppression, hierarchies, and forms of intractable dominance. The fact that capitalism is extremely organized makes little difference, because one resists against a multivalent, diffuse form of power. Nor, as Jøureen pointed out two decades ago, does it seem to matter that structurelessness produces its own forms of tyranny. Thus, in place of any organized politics, postmodernist social theory offers us variations on pluralism, individualism, individualized agency, and ultimately individualized solutions that have never—and will never—be capable of resolving (much less addressing) structural problems. But this is, precisely, postmodernism's telos. As Neil Larsen observes, it is the "perfect 'radical' argument for a capitalist politics of pure irrationalist spontaneity. And we know who wins on the battlefield of the spontaneous" (1990, 13-14).

These four sites of convergence culminate in deepening depoliticization and apathy among academics. Postmodernist social theory teaches us to make peace with the fragmentation, deterioration, and devastation that surround us. Revolution, we are told, is impossible despite the fact that the ongoing consolidation of capital at the top of society constitutes, according to most pundit, a revolution. Revolution, moreover, is undesirable—we need to be considering the discursive constitution of the social and the political—seeking those contingent and ephemeral moments of rupture, rather than doing the more difficult, frustrating, and time-consuming work of building organized opposition.

Certainly these forms of thought offer a complex rationale for avoiding the very questions we need to be raising at this historical moment, not to mention convenient alibis for our lack of engagement with politics and political issues. It is time to put a stop to this discursive channel surfing. A change, in fact, is taking place across the humanities in a renewed interest in historical materialism and political activism among graduate students and faculty. This change is taking place not because of fissures in discourse or a rejection of the alleged essentialist fixity of class analysis, but because academics are beginning to feel the material pressures of downsizing, deregulation, outsourcing, and speed-ups in production. As Louis Menand has written,

The university's external enemies are real and they have attained a position of power over us unknown since the 1950s. These enemies could care less about distinguishing classic liberals and neo-Victorians from critical pedagogues. They loathe the very idea of public subsidy for independent thought, and they would happily put us all out in the cold if they could. (in Perlstein 1995, 795)
Changes are taking place, in short, not because we have successfully intervened in any discursive formations, but because our distance from economic necessity is dwindling."

We face important challenges in the coming years as intellectuals and as members of society. In order to confront these challenges, we need better strategies for understanding the correspondences that exist between our own work and the work of capitalist ideologies. And—this point is crucial—we need tactics for transforming that understanding into action. As levels of repression and immiseration grow in the U.S., so does the necessity for making connections across class and race lines: for building solidarity both inside and outside the academy. Instead of disavowing the authority conferred upon us by our institutional positions—instead of condemning representations—we might learn how to wield what power remains to us more strategically, collectively, and effectively."

Of course, such a project depends on whether academics’ interest in “the political” and “the social” has any substance beyond an apologia for learning to live with the status quo.

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NOTES

1. Although there are certainly distinctions that can be made between the categories "postmod­ernist" and "poststructuralist," my purpose in this paper is to chart tendencies that cut through these terms.

2. Edward Said (1984) argues that when theories travel (historically and culturally), what may once have been an effective mode of analysis can become an ideological trap. The point I am making here is similar, although more focused on the synchronic rather than the diachronic elements of this process.

3. Of course, Marx did not argue for an essentialism based on an authentic working-class “identi­ty.” Although “the consciousness of the necessity of a fundamental revolution” emanates from the subordinated classes, it “may, of course, arise among the other classes too through the con­templation of the situation of this class” (Marx and Engels 1976, 95). It is also worth recalling the following distinction from The Eighteenth Brumaire: “In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peas­ants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organization among them, they do not form a class” (Marx 1963, 172).

4. See Paul Smith’s “Laclan’s and Mouffe’s Secret Agent” (1991) for a much more thorough and incisive analysis of this point.

5. I realize that this is more a moral than a descriptive statement; one shouldn’t be able to speak about race and racism without speaking about class. The abstract nature of postmodernist social theory, however, has made it possible to do just that.

6. To the extent that few feminists would identify themselves as “essentialist,” anti-essentialism within feminist theory has more the characteristics of a rigid, dogmatic position than a debate.

7. “Excerpts from Vice President’s Speech on Cities and Poverty,” New York Times, 20 May 1992. All further references to Quayle’s speech are from this article.

8. For detailed discussions of the deployment of this argument by politicians and the media, see The Nation’s special issue, “Scapegoating the Black Family,” July 24/31 1989. See also Maude

9. In regard to another variant of rights rhetoric, Rosa Luxemburg argued, “In a word, the formula, ‘the right of nations to self-determination,’ is essentially not a political and problematic guideline in the nationality question, but only a means of avoiding that question” (1976, 110). Her point here, which has immediacy today, is that such abstract, eternal calls for rights offer no practical guidelines for action. Thus, to demand the “right to parent” or “women’s right to abortion,” without at the same time demanding the material conditions that would make these rights possible, is in fact a way of avoiding the question.

10. An example of a similar displacement occurred during the debates over President Clinton’s appointment of Zoe Baird for Attorney General and the revelations about the hiring of illegal aliens. Many claimed that such scrutiny only applied because of Baird’s gender. There was, however, absolutely no attention in the mainstream media as to why privileged women and men hire illegal aliens—namely, the issue of wages. Barbara Katz Rothman offers an excellent analysis of the entry of women’s unpaid labor into the marketplace and its implications for feminist theory in Recreating Motherhood. Ideology and Technology in a Patriarchal Society (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989).

11. To speak about “identity” politics, moreover, is to run together a number of politically, ideologically, and historically different categories and/or movements.

12. Of course, anti-communist ideologies have a history that pre-dates the Cold War in the U.S. To adequately understand the roots of this ideology, one would have to look at the response to the Bolshevik Revolution in U.S. culture.

13. Those who have participated in attempts to organize faculty at universities will attest to the fact that objections to unionization all too frequently boil down to an anti-organizational bias held in place by individualism.

14. In no way do I mean to suggest that revolutionary agency is on the rise in the academy; nor do I mean to suggest that intellectuals will be the agents of revolutionary social change. Marx had valid reasons for suggesting that workers would be the agents of the revolution: they could shut down production and, more important for the purpose of this essay, having the least to gain from the status quo, they had the most to gain by changing it.

15. I hope that my argument throughout this paper has underscored the need for collective action rather than individual academics speaking out as “public intellectuals” for some non-existent constituency.