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Marxist Feminist Dialectics for the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT: Marxist dialectics contain several features that can help feminist theorists gain a better understanding of social life. First, Marxist dialectics call for the development of alternatives to Enlightenment accounts of what is to count as truth or knowledge. Second, Marx's work provides materials for a more nuanced and socially embedded understanding of subjectivity and agency than is available from either contemporary liberal theories or post-structuralist theories. And third, the understanding of the relation between knowledge and power present in Marx's work provides important criteria for what can count as better, or privileged, knowledges.

THIS IS AN EFFORT TO ARGUE that from the perspective of feminist theory we need to both excavate and transform Marxist theory to address issues of the present and the future. For me, these issues include most centrally taking analytic account of intersecting axes of domination along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality, as well as class. The central issue I want to address here is that of what Marxist theory, especially the dialectical understanding of the world contained in that theory, can provide in the way of resources for contemporary analysis.

Feminist theory has certainly challenged and rewritten Marxist theory. The period of the "unhappy marriage" of Marxism and feminism in which the two were one and that one was Marxism has come to a theoretical end (see Hartmann, 1981). Fundamental categories of Marxist theory have been questioned and rejected. First, there is the importance of labor. Feminists have raised questions about how labor is to be understood and have also highlighted the importance

of non-waged labor. Second, feminist analysis by its very nature questions the centrality of class as the only foundation for social analysis. Third, and related, feminist theory raises questions about Marxism as a teleological theory of social evolution by noting the importance of issues other than the development of relations of production which center around men's lives, and by noting the continued existence of patriarchal relations in socialist countries. Fourth, feminist theory has in many areas successfully questioned Marxism's claim to be the single theory that can explain all of society, including its history and its future. The questions for me are: 1) what Marxism has taught and can teach feminist theorists about political analysis and political practice; and 2) more important, how can we use these tools and insights — especially dialectical thinking — to create theories of justice and social change that address the concerns of the present? Or, put differently, how to reoccupy Marxism as feminism.[1]

Here I want to take two fundamental Marxist texts as my guides. The first is the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers only interpret the world in various ways, the point is to change it" (MECW, 1976, 3). The second text is Engels' graveside eulogy for Marx. Engels stated that Marx had "discovered the special law of motion governing the present day capitalist mode of production and the bourgeois society that this mode of production has created." But more important for my own purposes is the fact that he continues by stating that "this was not even half the man. . . . Marx was before all else a revolutionist" (Engels, 1978). Thus, he stresses the importance of Marx's political legacy, his role as a revolutionary committed to change the world for the benefit of the working class. I see this as a reminder that Marxism is fundamentally about building movements for social change, movements that recognize that injustice and domination are systematic. These movements need both political organizing and theoretical analysis to do the work of supporting the insights as well as the struggles of the many who are oppressed, exploited and marginalized.

What does it mean to reoccupy Marxism as feminism? For me it has come to mean most centrally to take up the methodological and epistemological advice and practices I found there and apply them in new directions. It has come to mean seeing dialectical thinking as applicable to many areas of social life. While I found much of Marx's

1 I owe this phrasing to Kathi Weeks.

critique of capitalism and the increasing commodification of more and more areas of social life persuasive, the focus of my concern at that time was to understand the situation of women more specifically.[2] I was coming to believe that feminism was not a set of specific conclusions about the situation of women, but was instead a mode of analysis that could be usefully applied to studying not simply women but society as a whole.

We need an understanding of objectivity that differs from the Enlightenment faith in the neutrality of reason. I would like to suggest that parts of the Marxist tradition represent an important resource for developing such an account — for insisting on the impossibility of neutrality and the necessity of engagement, for recognizing that the social relations in which we live structure (though they do not determine) the ways we understand the world; and for providing tools that can allow us to trace the ways our concepts and categories both structure and express the ways we interact with the world. As Haraway so eloquently puts it, "'our' problem is how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency of all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice of recognizing our own 'semiotic technologies' for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world . . . friendly to earthwide projects of finite freedom . . ." (Haraway, 1990, 187).

I have a number of problems with Marx's own theories, among them: 1) class, understood centrally as a relation among men, is the only division that counts; 2) the analysis is fundamentally masculinist in that workers' wives and their labor are presumed; 3) homosocial birth images mark the analysis in important ways; 4) women come and go in the analysis and are profoundly absent from Marx's account of the extraction of surplus value — the heart of his analysis; 5) he is clearly a 19th-century Eurocentric writer who can pay little attention to such contemporary concerns as environmental issues and the rise of service industries.

But given these serious objections why should I raise once again the importance of a 19th-century European patriarch for late 20th-century feminist theory? Why Marx? Why now? The fall of the Soviet

2 Note that I write here of women with no effort to mark the category. I do so because that is faithful to the project I had at the time I read Marx, and to the projects of many other feminists in the early 70s.

state and the Berlin Wall have occasioned a global celebration of the market, and of capitalism's successes. Fredric Jameson notes that, for those who do not distinguish clearly between "Marxism itself as a mode of thought and analysis, socialism as a political and societal aim and vision, and Communism as a historical movement," Marxism can appear to be an embarrassing remnant of the past (Jameson, 1996, 14). And certainly Teresa Ebert is right when she suggests that "under the pressure of the dominant discourses of Postmodernism, Marxism and historical materialism are becoming lost revolutionary knowledges for the current generation of feminists" (Ebert, 1996, x). Still, even figures such as Derrida argue, regarding *The Communist Manifesto*: "I know of few texts in the philosophical tradition, perhaps none, whose lesson seems more urgent today" (quoted in Ebert, 1996, x). I would add that in the context of a capitalism which has become truly global, and in which ever more of life is commodified, much of Marx's critique of capitalism remains very apt.[3]

I see Marx as an anti-Enlightenment figure on balance, although it must be recognized that his relationship to the Enlightenment and the whole tradition of Western political thought is that of both the inheriting son and the rebellious son (cf. Benhabib, 1990, 11). Thus, his account of the process of labor itself can he seen in sexual/gendered terms: Marx theorizes the relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him: "activity as suffering, strength as weakness, *begetting as emasculating*. . . self estrangement" (in Tucker, 1978, 76). Marx's account of estranged labor thus uses some of the "second homosocial birth" images I have found in many works in the history of Western political thought. The point of this second birth is to overcome the defects of the first birth — bodies born from women — and to replace it with a more durable and intellectual/spiritual one.[4] Thus, for Marx, the worker creates both himself and the world, and herein lies both the core of the problem and the potential solution.

Feminist theory too exists in an ambivalent relation to the Enlightenment. On the one hand, feminist theorists sometimes argue for a "me too" position to work for women's inclusion in a number

3 See, for example, Donna Haraway's chapter "Universal Donors in a Vampire Culture" and her discussion of OncoMouseTM in *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

4 Achilles was one of the first to want to be born again in legend and song. He prayed that he would do some great thing before he died and so could live on after his bodily death.

of societal institutions (see Ferguson, 1993). On the other hand, women as women have never been the "subjects" of Enlightenment/liberal theory, so women's insistence on speaking at all troubles those theories (Eisenstein, 1982). (It is certainly my suspicion that this, along with decolonization, and struggles for recognition by oppressed racial and ethnic groups, is one reason why European and North American theorists have lost hold of some of their certainties.)

My reading of Marx is one that some have suggested is itself postmodern. I am greatly indebted to Bertell Ollman's ideas about Marxist dialectics as based on an account of internal relations. I also share David Harvey's very similar understanding of dialectics (Ollman, 1971; Harvey, 1996). Thus, I take from Marx the idea that one must replace the idea that the world is composed of "things" with that of the importance of "processes." In addition, Marx's dialectical method holds that things do not "exist outside of or prior to the processes, flows, and relations that create, sustain, or undermine them."[5]

I see my reading of Marx as making several important contributions to my work in feminist theory. First, Marx's dialectical knowledge practices enable an alternative to the Enlightenment account of what is to count as truth or knowledge. Second, Marx's work provides materials for a more nuanced and socially embedded understanding of subjectivity and agency than is available from either contemporary liberal theory or theories influenced by post-structuralism. And third, the understanding of the relation of knowledge and power present in his work provides some criteria for what can count as better, or privileged, knowledges. I will take up each of these points in turn.

In the modernist/Enlightenment version, truth has to do with discovering a pre-existing external something which if it meets some criteria can be labeled as true. Moreover, it must be discovered from nowhere in particular so that Truth can retain its pristine qualities. The definition of truth that I rely upon is more complex than this and is heavily indebted to my own reading of Marx. I want to refer to Marx in order to suggest in a shorthand way how my version of standpoint theory approaches the question of truth. In the *Theses on Feuerbach*, he

5 Harvey (1996, 49). See also Ollman's statement quoted by Harvey (48): "Dialectics restructures our thinking about reality by replacing the common-sense notion of 'thing' as something that *has* a history and *has* external connections to other things, with notions of 'process,' which contains its history and possible futures, and 'relation,' which contains as a part of what it is its ties with other relations" (Ollman, 1993, 11).

argued against an understanding of "things" as "objects," "especially objects of contemplation," and makes the following statement: "Man must prove the truth, *i.e.*, the reality and power, the this-wordliness of his thinking in practice." And here we must be brought back to the two texts I took as guides for this discussion: Marxism is about political change and social justice, and these concerns are central to any Marxism-influenced dialectical analysis of social relations.

The Marxian project, then, changes the criteria for what is to count as knowledge: for Marx, to have knowledge includes seeing, tasting, feeling, and thinking. If truth is the reality and power of our ideas in action, then we must treat knowledge and truth in much more historically specific ways and devote attention to the social, historical, and ultimately conventional form of all definitions of truth. (And on this point one can be reminded of Foucault's claim that truth is simply error codified.) We are reminded that the search for knowledge is a *human* activity, structured by human requirements.

But here I become uncomfortable with the language of truth. The search for truth is not at all the way to understand Marx's project. Perhaps a better concept to use is that of certitude: a sense that one has credible knowledge, knowledge that is "good enough" to act on. The most fundamental point is to understand power relations — in his case, power relations centered on the development of capitalism and the commodification of ever greater areas of human existence. But the point of understanding power relations is to change them. And to this end, Marx's categories move and flow, enacting the fluidity that many postmodernist theorists insist on. To give just a few examples: Capital is described as "raw materials, instruments of labor, and means of subsistence of all kinds *which are utilized* to produce new raw materials, new instruments of labor, and new means of subsistence," as "accumulated labor," as "living labor serving accumulated labor," as "a bourgeois production relation, a social relation of production," as "an independent social power" (Tucker, 1978, 176, 207, 208). Capital is all these things at various moments and for various analytical purposes. Thus, for example, when Marx wanted to call attention to the specifics of the production process, he was likely to refer to capital as raw materials and instruments of labor. But when he wanted to point to the power of capital to structure society as a whole, he was more likely to refer to capital as an independent social power.

The result is a very complex idea of what constitutes "truth," which now becomes a difficult term to retain if one is to avoid falling back into Enlightenment categories of analysis. Susan Hekman is right to point to many similarities between Marx's claims about truth and a number of Foucault's positions. She states tellingly that, despite these similarities, Foucault would argue that the discourses of the oppressed are just that, and are not closer to "reality." But she also recognizes that these discourses may, however, be closer to "a definition of a less repressive society" (Hekman, 1997, 10).

Marxist theories (and feminist standpoint theories) also remind us that the categories and criteria for judging truth that come most immediately to mind are likely to be those of the dominant groups. Thus, Marx could argue that everything appears reversed in competition, and that the accumulation of wealth in capitalism is at the same time the accumulation of misery. Yet these categories and criteria are *made* true for all members of society. One can think of many examples such as this — *e.g.*, compulsory heterosexuality enforced as a "truth," not discovered but made real through a variety of practices and sanctions.

My arguments for adopting a feminist standpoint, following Lukács' discussion of the standpoint of the proletariat, recognize the danger of the slogan, "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." In the context of power relations extant in many parts of the globe, "knowing the truth" is much more likely to get you jailed or disappeared. Both Marx and Lukács recognized that truth and power are intimately connected: what is to count as truth, methods for obtaining it, criteria for evaluation — all are profoundly influenced by extant power relations.

To turn to the second issue — the nature of subjects and their possibilities of agency — I found in Marx and Marxist theories the kinds of social constructivist theories of the subject that others have encountered only later in poststructuralism. But in contrast to the American tendency (certainly with the help of some European poststructuralists themselves) to interpret these theories in liberal pluralist, and in some cases libertarian terms, terms that rely only on accounts of the micro-processes of power, I found in Marxian thought an insistence on what some have called a "global" as opposed to "totalizing" theory (Hennessey, 1993). The focus is on the macro-processes of power, those that, although they may be played out in individual

lives, can only be fully understood at the level of society as a whole. To claim that we can understand the totality of social relations from an individual perspective is as futile an effort as the claim that we could see everything from nowhere. But a focus on large-scale social forces highlights different aspects of the subject.

Thus, Marx can be read as providing a theory of the subject as subjected, as does Foucault. That is, one can read the essay on estranged labor, or the theory of surplus value in *Capital* (which I would argue are two versions of the same philosophical argument) as accounts of how men (and for him they are) constitute themselves as subjected, by pouring their lives into objects that belong to others. Yet Marx's theory of subjects/subjection differs from Foucault's in its stress on potentials and possibilities for developing other forms of subjectivity.[6] In addition, the Marxian theory of subjectivity is rightly classified as a "theoretical antihumanism," an idea developed under this heading by Althusser and passed on by him to Foucault and Derrida. That is, the subjects who matter are not individual subjects who are simply human beings but subjects who are defined by their relation to larger collective subjects, or groups. And these groups must be understood as defined by macro-processes (whether languages, ideologies, or discourses) that structure societies as a whole. At the same time, these groups must not be seen as formed unproblematically by their subjection, that is by existing in a particular social location and therefore coming to (being forced to) see the world in a particular way. My effort to develop the idea of a feminist standpoint, in contrast to "women's viewpoint," was an effort to appropriate this insight (Hartsock, 1983; 1998). Chela Sandoval's notion of the importance of strategic identity for women of color represents an important advance in understanding this process, as is her development of the notion of oppositional consciousness.[7]

Sandoval argues that U. S. third world feminism can function as a model for oppositional political activity in the United States. She pro-

6 Because I want to adapt Marx to the concerns of contemporary feminism, I want to change the ideas about the potential subjectivities of the proletariat and its "historic mission" and expand on the concept of potential. Bell hooks, rather than arguing for such a mission, has discussed potential subjectivities under the heading of "yearning" for a different and better world. See hooks, 1990.

7 She made an excellent point in her essay on the development of the category of "women of color" out of the consciousness-raising sessions at the 1981 National Women's Studies Association meetings; see Sandoval, 1990. Much of what follows comes from Sandoval's article, "U. S. Third World Feminism" (Sandoval, 1991).

poses that we view the world as a kind of "topography," defining points around which "individuals and groups seeking to transform oppressive powers *constitute themselves* [italics added] as resistant and oppositional subjects" (Sandoval, 1991, 4). She holds that once the "subject positions" of the dominated are "self-consciously recognized by their inhabitants" they can be "transformed into more effective sites of resistance" (*ibid.*). She discusses a "differential consciousness" which she states operates like the clutch of an automobile allowing the driver to engage gears in a "system for the transmission of power" (*ibid.*, 14).

Here, her views parallel those of Gramsci who suggests that we rethink the nature of identity: "our capacity to think and act on the world is dependent on other people who are themselves also both subjects and objects of history" (Gramsci, 1971, 346). In addition, one must reform the concept of "the individual" to see it as a "series of active relationships, a process in which individuality, though perhaps the most important, is not the only element to be taken into account." Individuality, then, is to be understood as the "ensemble of these relations. . . . to create one's personality means to acquire consciousness of them and to modify one's own personality means to modify the ensemble of these relations" (352). Moreover, Gramsci holds that each individual is the synthesis of these relations and also of the history of these relations, a "precis of the past" (353). The constitution of the subject, then, is the result of a complex interplay of "individuals" and larger-scale social forces. Groups are not to be understood, as Hekman seems to do, as aggregates of individuals. Moreover, the constitution of the "collective subject" posited by standpoint theories requires an always contingent and fragile (re)construction/transformation of these complex subject positions. As Kathi Weeks has put it, "this project of transforming subject-positions into standpoints involves an active intervention, a conscious and concerted effort to reinterpret and restructure our lives. . . . A standpoint is a project, not an inheritance; it is achieved, not given" (Weeks, 1996, 101).

I shall turn now to my third point, the issue of privileged knowledge. As I have reflected on both these and other discussions of standpoint theories over the years I have come to believe that it is the intertwining of issues of politics on the one hand with the more traditional philosophical questions concerning truth and knowledge on the other, along with their conflicting criteria for claims of epistemologi-

cal validity, which have been responsible for much of the controversy. Standpoint theories must be recognized as essentially contested in much the same way that I argued the concept of power is essentially contested: *i.e.*, arguments about how to understand power rest on differing epistemologies. Still I prefer to see this as an indication that privileged knowledge claims represent a fertile terrain for feminist debates about power, politics, and epistemology.

Fundamentally, I take Marx to be arguing that the criteria for privileging some knowledges over others are ethical and political as well as purely "epistemological." The quotation marks here are to indicate that because of my reading of Marx I see ethical and political concepts as involving epistemological claims on the one hand, and ideas of what is to count as knowledge involving profoundly important political and ethical stakes on the other. Marx makes an important claim: knowledge that takes its starting point from the lives of those who have suffered from exploitation produces better accounts of the world than that of dominant groups. I want to expand this insight/argument and suggest that views from the margins, or views from below (defined in more heterogeneous terms than Marx would have) are both better and more clear-sighted. The criteria Marx proposes can provide important guidelines for contemporary theorists. First he argues that by adopting the standpoint of the working class, or of production, the dynamics of capitalist society can be much more fully understood. That is, not just the supposedly neutral workings of the "free" market are to be taken into account, but also the ways in which production including the social relations of production creates products, markets, and consumers. Thus, the market becomes one of several social forces to be taken into account. Moreover, such a vantagepoint aids in the process of developing a utopian vision, a vision that seems particularly difficult to develop and maintain in the last years of the 20th century with its unrelieved celebration of the market as the solution to all social problems.

Second, Marx argues for the privilege of some knowledges over others on the ground that they offer possibilities for the development of more human-friendly and freedom-friendly projects. Thus, contrary to Foucault's position which stresses the ways the different discourses develop and subject individuals in different ways, Marx stresses the power of groups of people to overcome their subjection and to use their creativity for their own purposes.

There is a third aspect to the claim that some knowledges are "better" than others, and here I think Chela Sandoval has elaborated the most important point of Marx's analysis: the use of these knowledges for the self-conscious transformation of individuals into resistant, oppositional, and collective subjects. In the current context of a much fuller realization of globalization of markets in both labor and capital, the development of oppositional and collective subjects can only become a much more complicated series of tasks.

But to return more explicitly to the process by which consciousness is changed, or experience reinterpreted in standpoint terms, I think it is worth remembering that the vision of the ruling groups structures the material relations in which all parties are forced to participate and therefore cannot be dismissed as simply false. Given this formulation, I would like to underline once again the extent to which claims that interpretation is involved in an effort to discover truth are problematic. Truth is to a large extent what the dominant groups can make true; history is always written by the winners. Thus the understanding available to the oppressed must be struggled for, and represents an achievement that requires both systematic analysis and the education that grows from political struggle to change those relations. This point is also the key to the reason I chose the term "feminist" standpoint, rather than the standpoint of women.

The process of adopting a standpoint or, in other terms, developing an oppositional consciousness is described by Gloria Anzaldua (1987, 87): "The process is inner . . . the struggle has always been inner and is played out in outer terrains." One's location in the social structure does not change, but the understanding of its meaning shifts dramatically. In these terms the work of Michelle Cliff is particularly instructive. She describes the difficulty she had, a light-skinned Jamaican woman with a Ph.D. on the Italian Renaissance, in coming to approach herself as a subject, or in my terms adopting a standpoint. She states, in "Note on Speechlessness," that she had internalized the "message of anglocentrism, of white supremacy" (Cliff, 1985, 13). She notes that she began, through participation in the feminist movement, to retrace the African part of herself and to reclaim it. She is clear about the difficulty of the project. She says that, in an earlier book, she wrote as someone who was unable to "recapture the native language of Jamaica" and so relied on English, but still wrote from a feminist consciousness, a consciousness of colonialism, and a knowl-

edge of self-hatred (16). As she began to write in a way that put her own identity and experience at the center, she notes that her writing style became a kind of shorthand. "Write quickly before someone catches you. Before you catch yourself" (*ibid.*). Her writing is informed by and structured by her rage, and marks very clearly the struggle — both political and personal — involved in taking up a position from which the dominant order becomes visible with all its distortions.

Michelle Cliff's struggles are illustrative as well of the final charge leveled against standpoint theories — whether my own or Lukács' original argument. These theories are held to describe actually existing working-class views or "women's perspectives" that are constituted by oppression but are unaware of possible complicity in the oppression of others. As is evident from my discussion of the achieved character of a standpoint, it is constituted by more than oppression. Fredric Jameson has probably put it most clearly when he states that the experience of negative constraint and violence that occurs in the commodification of labor power dialectically produces the positive content of its experience as the self-consciousness of the commodity (Jameson, 1988, 67). Once again, Michelle Cliff's work is instructive. She looks back, to try to locate what happened. "When did *we* (the light-skinned middle-class Jamaicans) take over from *them* as oppressors?" (67). Cliff is clearly conscious about her complicity with imperialism and racism. It is a central aspect of her ability to locate herself in a critical context.

In addition, Cliff writes of the "insanity" and "unreality" of the "normal." She writes of light-skinned middle class Jamaicans that "we were colorists and we aspired to oppressor status. . . . We were convinced of white supremacy. If we failed, our dark part had taken over: an inherited imbalance in which the doom of the creole was sealed." She steps back to look at what she has written and states that this "may sound fabulous, or even mythic. It is. It is insane" (Cliff, 1988, 78).

Moreover, I see Cliff, Anzaldua and others as developing a kind of privileged knowledge that takes nothing of the dominant culture as self-evidently true. The privilege is earned by means of the struggle to overcome what the dominant culture tells us about the world and ourselves, the struggle to construct and live in a political community, and to build with it an accountable epistemological community.

The most important issue for me is the question of how we can use theoretical tools and insights to create theories of justice and social

change that address the concerns of the present. Marx, for all of the difficulties with both his theoretical work and the state of actually (non)existing socialism, calls our attention to certain macro-level issues to be addressed. In addition, one can find in the work of theorists such as Gramsci much more useful and complex theorizations of relations between "individuals" and society as a whole, which open up possibilities for both new knowledges and new collectivities.

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