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### Feminism without Guarantees: The Misalliances and Missed Alliances of Postmodernist Social Theory

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## Feminism without Guarantees: The Misalliances and Missed Alliances of Postmodernist Social Theory

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*Carol A. Stabile*

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In this essay, I sketch the parameters of a larger argument about feminist practices, and perceptions of feminism within the “New World Order.” I am primarily concerned with intellectual vision—not as Donna Haraway theorizes it (1988, 1989, 1990, 1991), for I believe her to be myopic around the very issues that are central to my concerns, but more in keeping with Pierre Bourdieu’s insistence on the need to identify “the point from which you can see what you see” (1990, 131). The project at hand focuses on the politically interested nature of feminist visions; more specifically, on how the point from which we see what we see is structured and often limited by unacknowledged, yet specific, class interests.

Because of the vagueness congealed around the terms I use in this argument, I want to briefly define the following at the outset: socialism, class, and postmodernist social theory. In the first, I am defining socialism as a movement at the center of which is the concept of class struggle against capitalism. By “class analysis” I am, like Ellen Meiksins Wood, arguing for “a comprehensive analysis of social relations and power . . . based on the historical/materialist principle which places the relations of production at the centre of social life and regards their exploitative character as the root of social and political oppression” (1986, 14). Such an analysis does not mean overlooking “the *differences* which express the *social formation*” (Marx 1978, 247), nor a mechanistic materialism, but it maintains that oppression finds its most extreme and violent expression through economic exploitation and alienation.<sup>1</sup>

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 subjects 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 object 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 forms of critical theory that rely upon an uncritical and idealist focus on the discursive constitution of the “real,” a positivistic approach to the notion of “difference,” and a marked lack of critical attention to the context of capitalism and their own locations within processes of production and reproduction. Although there are obvious and necessary distinctions to be made between the categories “postmodernist” and “poststructuralist,” my purpose in this paper is to chart certain lines of tendency that cut through these terms.

Within the context of a worsening global economic situation, and from a location within an institution itself based on the reproduction of class divisions,<sup>2</sup> it seems that capitalism depends upon the very mystifications that postmodernist social theorists reproduce around the category of class. In order to unpack the implications of these mystifications and their relevance for feminist theory more fully, I begin by summarizing one of the more influential theoretical arguments and then move on to discuss related theoretical moves in feminist theory and in media representations of feminism. Although few feminists directly cite Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), the postmodernist social theory they espouse has a strong affinity with similar feminist arguments in the United States, thus making their text an appropriate starting place.

### Postmodernist Social Theory

At the center of Laclau and Mouffe’s argument is the claim that the Marxist concept of “class” is essentialist and impedes “radical democratic politics.” Calling for a pluralism based on a reformist premise, they insist that

1. The argument that subjects (particularly in the United States) do not think their identities through the category of class seems to me not only defeatist but a major concession to hegemonic forces as well. For example, it could be argued that “women” did not think their identities through “feminism” until the work of the women’s movement in the 1960s. Furthermore, since critiques of the subject often problematize theories of agency, this argument seems contradictory insofar as agency is problematized and then, with a certain amount of finality, reinscribed.

2. See Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) and Bourdieu (1988) for analyses of educational institutions.

The fundamental obstacle in this task is the one to which we have been drawing attention from the beginning of this book: 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 (1985, 17).

It is worth noting here that nowhere does Marx argue in favor of 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). In place of the alleged fixity and “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 (113).

Articulatory practices, which “take place not only *within* given social and political spaces, but *between them*” (140), thus replace alliances previously forged through class struggle and with the subordinated classes.

Laclau and Mouffe are, if nothing else, consistent in their defensive argument that Marxism “privileges” class in ways that marginalize or ignore the oppression of social groups not constituted economically. The examples they give of such groups, however, are of generally middle-class movements: feminism, environmentalism, antinuclear activism, and lesbian and gay rights. One is obliged to ask who it is, precisely, that Laclau and Mouffe’s argument privileges as the agents of social change—a change whose telos is, for them, reformist rather than revolutionary. Or to put it in slightly more pointed terms, whose political interests are served by their theory of nonfixity and discursive equivalences?

Eventually, Laclau and Mouffe wind up arguing that

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 (186).

Although Laclau and Mouffe insist that the centrality of class in Marxist analyses is essentialist, they recognize the need for some form of centrality, some “new” center. What is the nature of this new “center”? Around what new “totality” will it converge? From what place, what now invisible class positions, does it emanate? Within the scope 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” and

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).

That being the case, who better to form this new center for political struggle? And in place of the so-called privileging of class (and here it seems revealing indeed that in the United States, the only place where class may be said to be centralized is within marginalized Marxist analyses in the academy), we find the privileging of intellectuals and intellectual activity. This is, of course, a convenient move for intellectuals since it means that (a) we needn't invoke the notion of class at all because the concept is intrinsically essentialist; and (b) we do not need to concern ourselves with the class privilege enjoyed by intellectuals since oppressions are, within the discursive field, necessarily unfixed and somehow equivalent.

### Postmodernist Feminism

Michèle 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

An obvious explanation of the enormous current interest in their work is that it speaks to a problem—the weight to be attached to social class as opposed to other salient divisions such as gender, ethnicity or age, for example—that has exercised a major hold on both academic analyses and on practical political activity across the traditional right/left spectrum (1991, 68).

Barrett briefly 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 an analysis of whom, precisely, this radical new theorization attracts.

Barrett's central critique of Laclau and Mouffe is that they are too Marxist—she'd prefer a more Foucauldian and even less deterministic model of power relations. In this way, she suggests that the contentious issues of determinism and materialism can be shelved. 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” (140). Barrett concludes of Laclau and Mouffe:

It remains to be seen, however, how far *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* really does carry through 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. Thus reformulated, it would ask: to what extent does such a dismantling erase the class position of academics and so limit the notion of political struggle to that occurring on an ideological or discursive terrain owned and largely occupied by dominant, if now invisible, economic interests?

Within feminist theory, the privileging of discourse as prior to materiality and/or absolutely productive of materiality and the associated lack of attention to class specificity often take two seemingly distinct trajectories. In the first, “women” are seen as a primarily discursive construction and discourse itself is seen to encompass the entire domain of political action. In the second, the category “women” reigns uncontested. These positions are generally framed in terms of anti-essentialism versus essentialism, an opposition that has been far from productive for feminist theory. I want to shift the terms of this debate somewhat in order to tease out the political convergences of the two by underscoring a problem common to both: neither anti-essentialism nor essentialism is capable of answering the kinds of questions posed by a historical materialist analysis.<sup>3</sup> Neither, in short, is critically self-reflexive.

Judith Butler’s “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism’ ” offers a stunning, and somewhat confusing, illustration of a feminist theory of discourse severed not only from materialism but from a theory of ideology as well. Following Laclau and Mouffe, Butler suggests

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 (1992, 20).

According to Butler, “The chant of antipostmodernism runs, if everything is discourse, then is there no reality to bodies” (17). Like many defenders of a vaguely defined, a priori, discursive realm, Butler is hard pressed to identify those forces intent on toppling critiques of the subject, although her references to foundationalism, totality, and universalizing, as well as her endorsement of Laclau and Mouffe, make it clear that at least one of these antipostmodernist chants 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 would advance in place of this is the belief that discourse precedes, structures, and limits subject formation. The point, she claims, most powerfully made by postmodernists and poststructuralists (and since Butler cannot identify the first, it is to be assumed that critiques of postmodernist social theories

3. For a compelling argument in favor of historical materialism, see Rosemary Hennessy’s *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse* (1993).

are identical to 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” (6). That the first does not necessarily follow from the second is inconsequential to Butler’s argument, because the establishment of a material basis for politics—be it “metapolitical” or otherwise—is precisely the object of her critique.

Instead, since the subject is constructed by politics and power prior to its material constitution, or rather its “intelligibility” (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).

It is interesting here that while Butler does not provide examples of anti-postmodernist 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” (10). This is a curious example indeed, for it implies that a social and political theory committed to contesting economic injustice—a theory that explicitly positions itself against capitalism—performs the same authoritarian operations as a war waged in the interests of capitalism itself.

According to Butler, “to assume from the start a procedural or substantive notion of the universal is of necessity to impose a culturally hegemonic notion on the social field” (5). Of course, without a theory of ideology, the interested nature of the ideas that structure and limit subject formation can be deferred or, in Butler’s case, simply ignored. In order “to impose a culturally hegemonic notion on the social field,” in short, one has to occupy a hegemonic position of power. Without rehearsing Marx and Engels’s critique of idealism in *The German Ideology*, it is still useful to point out that “The class which 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” (1976, 64).

Of course, in the contingent discursive realm of Butler’s theory, power is power and always already suspect on discursive, if not ideological or practical, grounds. But the effects of considering discourse as absolutely constitutive of materiality, the conflation of “discursive ordering” and “material violence” (Butler 1992, 17) and the belief that contingent signifying acts produce material bodies seem less than 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’ ” (Hall 1986, 49). Butler’s work ignores that the institutions productive of subjects, and the history of these institutions, are based on economic relations and ideologies that maintain and reproduce such unequal relations. Ultimately, Butler’s theory of the political precludes a theory of 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 (Butler 1992, 17).

In this way, Butler’s work enacts the very authoritarian and authoritative ruse that she seeks to avoid: politics are of necessity limited to idealist and discursive interventions characterized by class specificity and exclusiveness.

Although Butler’s text purports to call into question the universalization of “women” and its deployment as a foundational category, one of the few examples that she cites to support her argument is Albert Memmi’s *The Colonizer and the Colonized*—a text criticized because of its “exclusion of women from the category of the oppressed” (14). Not only does it seem curious that a text published in 1965 is used to support Butler’s argument for contingency and postmodernism; by reference to “women” Butler also reintroduces the very foundationalism that she seeks to call into question.

In effect, Butler’s jettisoning of materiality and her inattention to class position and historical context centralize the political interests of particular constituencies (namely, intellectuals), 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 the conflicts within feminism and the way in which such identifications work to isolate “feminism” in terms of class interests.

Like Laclau, Mouffe, Barrett, and Butler, Gallop, Hirsch, and Miller see the central conflict as a discursive one that operates in relative isolation from an economic or historical context. In their conversation, “feminism” exists only within the institutional boundaries of the academy, and feminist interests are reduced to questions of “power” and tenure. The sole form of power that they will admit to possessing is power over female graduate students and untenured female professors. Their claim to being “women,” in other words, 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

4. In this dialogue, the participants are mainly concerned with “the style and practice of critique within feminism” (1990, 349) or critiques of feminism made by feminists, which they refer to as “trashing.”

hear (Gallop et al. 1990, 355). At one point, Gallop raises the context of the conservative 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" (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 resolve the 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 that women of color were not invited to such-and-such a conference. Speaking of the addition of a chapter on "race" to her most recent book, Gallop observes:

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 (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—a problem that follows from tendencies immanent in postmodernist social theory—is that Gallop, Miller, and Hirsch authorize themselves to speak as feminists for a feminism located only in the academy and concerned centrally with the class interests of that position.

### **Quayle, The L. A. Uprising, and Murphy Brown**

In order to further clarify how these problems are reproduced in the larger political and economic context, I want to examine an incident that elicited an enormous amount of media attention during the 1992 presidential campaign: Dan Quayle's speech on "family values." Quayle's speech, published in newspapers nationwide and repeatedly highlighted on television, was made in response to the L.A. uprising and it played a part in Republicans' attempts to efface problems of racism and economic injustice (a move to which the Democrats implicitly con-

sented). Quayle's speech deflected attention from the current economic crisis to another crisis, discursive and abstract. He 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.<sup>5</sup>

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 1960's 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 traditional conservative rhetoric dating back 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."<sup>6</sup>

In 1986, CBS aired a Bill Moyers 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 neatly removed attention from the material circumstances in which people struggle to survive. Families, he tells us, 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 L.A. 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 originally contextualized Quayle's speech, quoting him as claiming that a "poverty of values" caused the L.A. uprising. The day after the 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 *Times* reported that

5. "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.

6. For detailed discussions of the deployment of this argument by the New Right, see *The Nation's* special issue, "Scapegoating the Black Family," 24/31 July 1989. See also Maude Lavin (1988).

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 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).

### Feminist Politics

The logic that links the L.A. uprising, Dan Quayle's speech, and "Murphy Brown" has profound importance for those of us who call ourselves feminists, since feminist ideologies played a major role in erasing the context for Quayle's accusations. Because middle-class feminists are those with the education and class position to have access to the media and the government, the terms of what counts as feminist politics in popular culture are usually set by them. Without the quip about the television show, it seems doubtful that there would have been a feminist response. It is not surprising, then, that feminists were outraged not by Quayle's racism but by his critique of Murphy Brown. Murphy Brown embodies the goals and life-style choices of many feminists: she's a highly paid, liberal, aggressive, articulate, and indisputably successful anchorwoman. *Time Magazine* has called her "Feminism's point guard, schmoozing with the big boys" (Corliss 1992, 48).

If feminism has been represented as a class-specific, single-issue affair, representations such as "Murphy Brown" have contributed to this problem: that the circumstances under which the television character labored bore no resemblance to the circumstances under which poor women labor seemed beside the point. Indeed, I think it fair to say that many feminists have increasingly invested in dematerialized campaigns. Since the late seventies, feminists have translated their political energies into symbolic actions and debates that have a distant relationship to the lived experience of many women in the United States. For example, in 1977, the Hyde Amendment, prohibiting the use of Medicaid funds for abortions, rendered abortion rights a moot point for poor women. Directly after passage of this amendment, as antiabortion forces were massively mobilizing for their concerted assault on *Roe v. Wade*, the National Organization for Women invested most of its time, energy, and funding into the ill-fated Equal Rights Amendment campaign. And during the mid-eighties, when cutbacks in health and welfare spending were drastically affecting huge numbers of women, men, and their children, feminists like Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin were pursuing antipornography legislation as the solution to violence against women. Finally, in the aftermath of Quayle's speech,

which conjoined racism and sexism (and class, if only through its glaring absence) and might have provided enormous impetus for a feminist campaign against racism, far too many feminists instead took on the task of defending a fictitious woman's right to parent, winding up in a much publicized squabble over definitions of what counts as a family.

In the last case, feminist politics seem 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 by 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 says: "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 North American form of pluralism, which is not all that dissimilar from 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 defining center, 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" is being used as a scapegoat for the economic crisis.

The second point concerns the equivalence between the terms "choice" and "circumstance," and the underlying notion that those who can afford to choose single parenthood and those who have no such choice confront the same or similar problems. The rhetoric of choice, as in "whether by choice or necessity," further works to imply that such choices are uniformly available to women. All 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 women—raise their children in a society that has in effect abandoned them. Unlike many feminists, these women cannot afford in-home day care, nor can many afford adequate health care.<sup>7</sup> 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

7. An example of this 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 the wages. Barbara Katz Rothman (1989) offers an excellent analysis of the entry of women's unpaid labor into the marketplace and its implications for feminist theory.

toward institutional 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 (with some legitimacy), 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 that "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 "glamorizing" single parenthood is not far from the mark, given the economic circumstances enjoyed by the fictitious Murphy Brown. It is distinctly ironic that the discourse of essentialism should be interrupted by the New Right.

Why has this particular context been erased? Why should it matter to feminism? When feminism works in concert with a conservative agenda to gloss over an issue of urgent political necessity, such as the L.A. uprising, then as feminists we need to rethink the strategies being employed. The fragmentation celebrated by postmodernist social theorists and the retreat from any understanding of the economic structuring of various debates continue to work in specifically hegemonic ways. For example, the erasure of the L.A. uprising in the "Murphy Brown" incident moved the debate away from issues of race, from the condition of inner cities, and from 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 much more comfortable terrain for debate. Here, indeed, we can see the material effects of the replacement of the "economics of untruth" with "the politics of truth."

### **Feminism and Class**

To repeat a now familiar litany, the point from which feminists see what they see, and ultimately construct claims about feminist political interests, is determined by race, gender, and class. While recently feminists have been attentive to the first two categories, the longstanding antipathy between Marxism and feminism in the United States has rendered attention to class relations and divisions an empty genuflection, despite its inclusion in the trinity. Attempts to disentangle these strands or pursue a single, linear model of analysis can only consolidate and privilege certain forms of oppression to the exclusion of other oppressive structures and practices. Establishing class as a central category of analysis for feminism emphasizes the relationality of structures of oppression in politically powerful ways. Furthermore, this move does not mean relinquishing the theoretical and practical gains following from feminist analyses of gender and race; instead, it provides a much more nuanced and complicated understanding of the manner in which oppressions are structurally intertwined.

Perhaps most importantly, this emphasis would enable feminists to produce

feminist theories and actions that are meaningful to those who do not enjoy what Gayatri Spivak calls “the institutional privileges of power” (1988, 280) which are so frequently taken for granted. In the United States, the top one percent of the population owns more assets than the bottom ninety percent. In the university settings where I work and where feminism has become institutionalized, multiculturalism has become standard fare in the academic diet, while fewer and fewer poor people and fewer and fewer people of color can hope to acquire a college education. A politics of discourse—idealist and historically vacuous—hardly seems capable of addressing the situation as it exists in the academy, much less moving beyond the confines of class interests specific to that institution.

In view of the fact that over 60 percent of the United States working class is female, feminism without a class analysis cannot offer an adequate framework for political struggles. Previous objections to Marxist theory, such as the belief that, as Joan Scott puts it, “the explanation for the origins of and changes in gender systems is found outside the sexual division of labor” (1988, 35), hold less purchase within the context of contemporary capitalism. No longer can “Families, households, and sexuality” (35) be seen as autonomous or cut off from the mode of production; in fact, Scott herself comments on the problems arising when families, households, and sexualities are accorded such autonomy. Instead, as women increasingly comprise a high percentage of the labor force both locally and globally, shifts in gender ideology need to be understood in terms of their context in the capitalist mode of production. As feminists and intellectuals, we might keep in mind the words of Rosa Luxemburg: “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” (1976, 253). Before we can envision a more just future, we need to be able to assess more systematically from what point it is that we see what we see and what has been habitually, and is once again, excluded from that perspective.

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