I know I am not alone. There must be hundreds of other women, may be thousands, who feel as I do. There may be hundreds of men who want the same drastic things to happen. But how do you hook up with them? How can you interlink your own struggle and goals with these myriad, hypothetical people who are hidden entirely or else concealed by stereotypes and/or generalities of ‘platform’ such as any movement seems to spawn? I don’t know. I don’t like it, this being alone when it is clear that there will have to be multitudes working together, around the world, if radical and positive change can be forced upon the heinous status quo I despise in all its overwhelming power.

June Jordan, “Declaration of an independence I would just as soon not have”, in Moving Towards Home: Political Essays

Introduction

It is conventional in academic and political circles by now to speak of “race” in the same breath with gender and class. It is more or less recognized that “race” can be combined with other social relations of power and that they could mediate and intensify each other.¹ This combination of “race”, gender and class is often expressed through the concept of ‘intersectionality’ in which three particular strands of social relations and ideological practices of difference and power are seen as arising in their own specific
social terrain, and then criss-crossing each other ‘inter-sectionally’ or aggregatively.² It is a coming together of social issues to create a moment of social experience.

Yet, speaking of experience, both non-white and white people living in Canada/the West know that this social experience is not, as lived, a matter of intersectionality. Their sense of being in the world, textured through myriad social relations and cultural forms, is lived or felt or perceived as being all together and all at once. A working class non-white woman’s (Black, South Asian, Chinese, etc.) presence in the usual racialized environment is not divisible separately and serially. The fact of her blackness, her sex and gender neutral personhood of being working class blend into something of an identity simultaneously and instantaneously.³ This identification is both in the eye of the beholder and her own sense of social presence captured by this gaze. The same goes for a white woman, yet when confronted with this question of ‘being’ and experience we are hard put to theorize them in terms of a social ontology. What could be the reason for this inadequacy of conceptualization which fails to capture such formative experientiality? If it is lived, then how can it be thought, and how can we overcome our conceptual shortcomings? It is my intent here to suggest a possible theorization which can address these questions, or at least to grasp the reasons for why we need to ask them in the first place. This is not a matter of simply responding to a theoretical challenge, but also to a political one. This is a basic piece of puzzle for the making of social democracy.

If democracy is to be more than a mere form consisting of political rituals which only serve to entrench the rule of capital and sprinkle holy water on existing social inequalities, it must have a popular and actually participatory content. This content should be of social and cultural demands concentrating in social movements and
organizations working through political processes that aim at popular entitlement at all levels. Such politics needs a social understanding which conceives social formations as complex, contradictory and inclusive phenomena of social interactions. It can not be a simple arithmetical exercise of adding or intersecting “race”, gender and class in a stratificatory mode. It can not posit “race” as a cultural phenomenon and gender and class as social and economic. It needs to overcome the segmentation of the overall social into such elementary aspects of its composition. For example, a trade union can not properly be said to be an organization for class struggle if it only thinks of class in economic terms without broadening the concept of class to include “race” and gender in its intrinsic formative definition. Furthermore, it has to make its understanding actionable on this socially composite ground of class.

Outside of the trade unions, which are explicitly ‘class’ organizations, the usual practice in current social justice movements is to adopt what is called ‘coalition’ politics without discriminating against platforms on which these organizations have been put together. This coalitionist activism is not only a tactical matter but reflects the same pluralist aggregative logic of social understanding. Organizations which are class based and those which are not come together because of their interest in certain issues. But in what would be called ‘new social movements’ the very issues of class and capital would be considered unnecessary, if at all. So popular demands on grounds of gender, “race”, sexuality, identity and so on have to be primarily formulated outside of class and capital and in cultural terms. In this political framework ‘antiracism’ becomes more a question of multiculturalism and ethnicity, as the socially relational aspects of racialization embedded in the former is converted into a cultural demand. It is not surprising that of
late there has been a sharp decline in work on “race” which combines hegemonic/cultural commonsense with the workings of class and state. The turn to postmodernism, the turn away from Marxism and class analysis, have resulted in increasing valorization of cultural norms and forms and made theories of discourse into vehicles for ‘radical’ politics. If once with positivist Marxists we had to deal with economism and class reductionism, now our battle is with ‘cultural reductionism’. Neither of these readings of social ontology allows us to do justice to politics for social justice. Our theoretical journey must begin somewhere else to reach another destination.

**Theorizing the social**

The theorization and politics I suggest are not exercises in abstraction. They do not eschew thinking or organizing on specific issues relating to economy, culture or politics. They can be highly specific or local in their scope, about neighbourhoods or homelessness in Toronto, for example, or speak to cultural problems. But using these different entry points into the social, they have to analyze and formulate their problems in terms of political problematics which show how these particular or local issues only arise in a wider or extra-local context of socio-economic and cultural relations. If they are ‘specific’ issues, we have to realize that it is because they are ‘specific’ to a general, larger set of social, structural and institutional relations. Can, for example, the type of homelessness experienced in Toronto be possible outside of the way capitalist economic and social development have proceeded in Canada as a whole? Redressing the wrongs in this case, one has to think and ask on grounds beyond the immediate situation, go above
and behind it. It would not do to think of ‘poverty’ as an issue or problem by itself, only to be added to “race”, class or gender, or conceive of these outside of capital.

In spite of frequent lip-service to reflexive social theorization or even some excellent works on class, slavery, colonialism and imperialism, especially by historians, we need to venture, therefore, into a more complex reading of the social, where every aspect or moment of it can be shown as reflecting others, where each little piece of it contains the macrocosm in its microcosm – as “the world in a grain of sand” (Wordsworth). What we have instead is a thriving theory industry which ruptures the integrity of the social and joyously valorizes ‘fragments’, preferring to posit a non-relational inchoateness, or to add them whenever necessary. By such accounts, as I said before, the social amounts to an ordering of regulatory parts – the old utilitarian arithmetic – and properly speaking, is inconceivable. Marxists and neo-marxists have also succumbed to a ceaseless debate on modernism and postmodernism, allowing the aesthetic, moral category of the ‘modern’ to distract them. Seeking to bypass the terms of this debate, I would like to come back to Marx’s own formulation of ‘the social’, the ontological or the existential, in different terms or concepts. Here I assume ‘the social’ to mean a complex socio-economic and cultural formation, brought to life through myriad finite and specific social and historical relations, organizations and institutions. It involves living and conscious human agents and what Marx called their “sensuous, practical human activity”. Here culture and society are not in a mechanical relation of an economic base and a cultural superstructure. All activities of and in the social are relational and are mediated and articulated with their expressive as well as embedded forms of consciousness. Here signifying and communicative practices are intrinsic
moments of social being. Using such a formulation of the social, here it is my primary concern to perform a Marxist critique of what “race” in particular means to ‘class’ and gender. In other words, I am trying to socialize the notion of “race”.

Before articulating my theory of the social I would like to pause over the habit of fragmentive or stratified thinking so prevalent among us, which ends up by erasing the social from the conception of ontology. This same habit can also produce an evaluative gesture whereby ‘the cultural’, for example, becomes secondary, apparent or illusory, and ‘class’, understood as a function of ‘economy’, becomes the ‘real’ or the fundamental creative force of society. Culture as superstructure ‘reflects’ or ‘corresponds’ to the economic base. Alternatively we have the reverse conceptual habit whereby the formative power of discourse determines the social. By becoming primarily discursive the social becomes a thought object. Epistemologies reach a proportion of exclusivity, which is of course not new and about which Marx speaks in his First Thesis on Feuerbach. Through both these reductive modes class politics can ignore “race” or gender, or politics based on any of these others ignore class. Positivist marxism can also rank the importance of social issues of struggle by relegating gender relations to the status of ‘secondary contradictions’ while “race” or caste are seen as mere ‘cultural’ forms of inequality. Currently the mainstream Western labour movements often dismiss issues of “race” as politics of discourse or ethnic/cultural identity. Conversely “race” activists may dismiss class or anti-imperialist politics as ‘white’ politics. Gender or patriarchy may be considered as entirely redundant by both groups, while feminists who can theorize community on grounds of being women may find “race” and class both redundant or of no intrinsic significance. Furthermore all groups might find what they do not consider
important to be also divisive and detrimental for the advancement of their movements.

My primary concern, on the other hand, is to bypass these conceptual positions and to offer an inclusive marxist critique with a social interpretation of difference, especially in regard to what “race” means to class and gender. In other words, how class can be transformed from an economic to a social concept which constitutively implicates both social relations and forms of consciousness. What I intend is best presaged by Edward P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class*, when he discusses class and class consciousness as active creations of social individuals.¹²

It is not news to hear that the culture of positivist thinking that pervaded the nineteenth century European, especially English intellectual world and the prestige accorded to a measuring scientifism, changed the tenor of social thought from the earlier philosophical tone. Notions such as ‘knowledge’ and ‘science’ took on a definitely technological and quantitative aspect, and to this were added strict notions of causality as well as the idea of social ‘laws’, parallel to ‘natural laws’ – an offshoot of study of human evolution. If we look at the later work of Frederick Engels, for example, we can see how later marxism absorbed this culture of utilitarian positivism and scientifism (e.g. Engels, 1969). As economics emerged as a science, since it could lend itself most fully to quantification, marxism changed from ‘critique’ of political economy as attempted by Marx to becoming political economy. The notion of economy came to substitute notions of the social. As such social organization and society became enunciations or functions of the economy. Lived social relations and experiencing subjects became subjected to one dimensional views of the social, that is, of economic relations or structures. This habit of scientifism has endured, erupting in Louis Althusser’s claim, for example, regarding an
‘epistemological break’ in Marx’s opus – periodizing it into philosophical and scientific. The concept and practice of ‘scientific’ marxism or socialism became a credo of communist parties throughout the world.

This scientific or positivist marxism, with its truncated and reified understanding of the social, interestingly relied much more on some characteristics of eighteenth century liberal thought rather than Marx’s own writings. Not the least of these is a compartmentalizing way of thinking which ruptures the formative, complex integrity of the social whole and creates segments or spheres of ‘the economic’, ‘the political’ and ‘the cultural’ which are in reality ontologically inseparable. This separation if social spheres was essential for the rising bourgeois state and society. In bourgeois or liberal democracy, in spite of its universalist claims, equality could only be formal and thus the notions of ‘liberality’ and ‘democracy’ could not be actually realized. But this way of thinking in self-contained spheres has become hegemonic or naturalized enough that programmatic, political marxism can, unconsciously perhaps, fall back upon the same separation of spheres. Broadly speaking, ‘class’ thus becomes an overarching economic category, while gender/patriarchy a social one and “race”, ‘caste’ or ‘ethnicity’ are categories of the cultural. It is not hard to see then how class struggle or class consciousness can be theorized and acted on minus “race” and gender, or vice versa. But not all marxists submitted to this liberal/bourgeois fragmentary and economistic reading of the social. Dubbed for their difference from others as ‘cultural marxists’, Georg Lukačs, Walter Benjamin or Raymond Williams, for example, actively explored the formative relations between culture and society in their broadest sense, while Antonio
Gramsci theorized on relations between these and the institution of the state and civil society.¹⁴

Socializing “race”

At the outset I need to state that the social phenomenon which I refer to as “race” is not a biological distinction actually inhering in people themselves. It is a way, and a power- inscribed way, of reading or establishing difference, and finding long-lasting ways to reproduce such readings, organization and practice. Roughly this is what people signal to when they say that “race” is a construct. The non-existence of “race” as a physical entity has been remarked on by critical Darwinians, such as Stephen J. Gould (1981) for example. This accounts for my use of double quotation marks, hedging the term from the danger of becoming considered as an actual fact of nature. “Race”, therefore, is no more or less than an active social organization, a constellation of practices motivated, consciously and unconsciously, by political or power imperatives with implied cultural forms – images, symbols, metaphors, norms which range from the quotidian to the institutional. This is the view that I wish to sustain through my theorization here.

If we consider “race” as a connotative, expressionist cluster of social relations in the terrain of certain historical and economic relations, and class as an ensemble of property oriented social relations with signifying practices, it is easy to see how they are formatively implicated. From this standpoint one could say that modern “race” is a social culture of colonialist and imperialist capitalism. “Race”, therefore, is a collection of discourses of colonialism and slavery, but firmly rooted in capitalism in its different aspects through time. As it stands, “race” can not be disarticulated from ‘class’ any more
than milk can be separated from coffee once they are mixed, or the body divorced from consciousness in a living person. This inseparability, this formative or figurative relation, is as true for the process of extraction of surplus value in capitalism as it is a commonsense practice at the level of social life. Economic participation, value of labour, social and political participation and entitlement, cultural marginalization or inclusion, are all part of this overall social formation.

This integrity of “race” and class can not be independent of the fundamental social organization of gender, that is, sex specific social division of labour, with mediating norms and cultural forms. Various proprietal relations, including of bodies, productive and reproductive labour, normative institutional and commonsensical cultural, are thus in a reflexive and constitutional relation. It is this that multinational corporations fall back on in the third world when they hire an overwhelmingly female labour force to raise their profit margin. In every social space there is a normalized and experiential as well as ideological knowledge about whose labour counts the least. The actual realization process of capital can not be outside a given social and cultural form or mode. There is no capital which is a universal abstraction. Capital is always a practice, a determinate set of social relations and a cultural one at that. Thus “race”, gender and patriarchy are inseparable from class, as any social organization rests on intersubjective relations of bodies and minds marked with socially constructed difference on the terrain of private property and capital.

Going back to Marx
In all modes of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it. (Marx, 1973:106-07)

To perform a reflexive theorization of the social it helps to go back to some key concepts used by Marx himself. Of the many he used I will primarily concentrate on three, that of the ‘concrete’ (Grundrisse), ‘civil society’ (The German Ideology, The Communist Manifesto), and ‘ideology’ (The German Ideology, The Holy Family, The Jewish Question). Relatedly we could use notions such as ‘mediation’, ‘reification’ and ‘fetishism’, which though partially articulated by Marx himself, were developed by marxists. It is interesting that of these marxists, such as Lukaćs, Benjamin, Althusser, Dorothy E. Smith, Frederic Jameson, to name a few, none were political economists. As critical social and cultural theorists they sought to break free from an economistic or class reductionist as well as cultural reductionist understanding of the social as elaborated in particular by capital.

Marx adapted the Hegelian concept of ‘the concrete’ in his notes on Capital compiled as Grundrisse. It seems to me that his treatment of this concept holds the correlates of reflexive epistemology earlier outlined as historical materialism in The German Ideology. About this notion he makes the following remarks:
The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence the unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality, and hence also the point of departure for observation (Anschauung) and conception (Marx 1973: 101. Emphasis mine)

The ‘concrete’ as the social, we can see, has a dual character for Marx. It is a mental or conceptual category, on the one hand, and on the other, an existing specific social formation. Thus it is both “a point of departure” (as the social) and “a point of arrival” (as theory). Something that is ‘concrete’ is not like an ‘object’ that is visible, as a table or a chair, but nonetheless its ‘concreteness’ is a determinate form of social existence. It is concretized by specific social relations with mediating and expressive as well as reproductive forms of consciousness and practices. In fact this ‘concrete’ social form is to be seen in contrast to a fact or an ‘object’, because it is not reified/fixed, hypostatized. It is a fluid, dynamic meaningful formation created by living subjects in actual lived time and space, yet with particular discernable features which both implicate it in other social formations and render it specific. From this perspective, then, “race”, as I said before, is a connotative cluster of social relations, implicated in others coded as ‘economic’ and ‘social’, that is, class and gender. If one were to broaden ‘class’ into a sociological category, thus making it stand for an entire ensemble of social relations, signifying practices and organizations, it could not be articulated within specific socio-historic formations such as ours without “race”. For this reason one could say that “race” is the ideological discourse as well as cultural commonsense
of a patriarchal colonial and imperialist capitalism. In such an existential historical terrain disarticulating “race” from “class” is impossible. Denuded of its metaphysical trapping, the notion of the ‘concrete’, then, in Marx’s usage, becomes one of social formation signaling a constitutive complexity. Social relations and organization, both complementary and contradictory, with historical accretion and inflection, go into the making of social ontology of the subject-agent. But it also has a capacity for conceptualizing these in a non-mechanical, non-serialized way.

It is sensible to move from the concepts ‘concrete’ and ‘the social’ to the notion of ‘civil society’ which is crucial to Marx’s critical epistemology, and to note its intimate connection with the notion of ‘mode of production’. Marx’s emphasis here is on the mode, the organizational and social ground for production as well as reproduction and their entailed politics, administration and cultures. The German Ideology, where he presents his ideas on the making of the social and social change, is a rich source for understanding the complexity of modes of production as articulated by Marx. Breaking free of the qualitative and ontological separation between civil society and the state, economy and culture, the political and the public sphere from the private and the familial, he presents in this text an integrated, constantly elaborating historical/social space. It is the theatre of class struggle and revolution. This historical and social movement is not presented as evolutionist and teleological, and it is shot through with both resisting and dominating forms of consciousness. Here are some examples of what he has to say about the civil society, the ground for ‘the mode’ or the style and the fashion
for organizing an everyday life for the production of private property and related moral and cultural propriety. For Marx, “… civil society is the true source and theatre of all history, and how absurd is the conception of history held hitherto, which neglects the real relationship and confines itself to highsounding dramas of princes and states.” (1970: 57). He also treats civil society as “social organization…which in all ages forms the basis of the state and of the rest of the idealistic superstructure”. (1970: 57)

If we scrutinize Marx’s statements two issues primarily grab our attention. First, that the “mode” of the social is a dynamic and integral one. In its character as a formative process, it can not be an aggregative one. This processual nature requires both temporal and spatial aspects, where it is here and now a specific form, which, however, will move on to something else in the future. But some aspects of this formation which lie in the now will, therefore, be in the past as well. You can not tear this live social way of being and its formational journey into component parts and yet expect it to live and move. Just as a dismembered and dissected human body does not yield up the secret of a conscious evolving life, nor does a ‘mode’ of production reveal its live social being when considered as segregated, though ‘intersecting’, social relations and forms of consciousness.

It is this that is precisely wrong with what is called ‘the intersectional method’. In this one has to agree with those romantics of the nineteenth century with whom Marx shared much of his weltanschauung or world view – that the whole is more than the sum of its parts.
The second issue of note is that of culture and consciousness. It is clear from explicit statements that consciousness is not an afterthought of existence. All activities are ‘sensuous practical human’ ones and as such of conscious agents and subjects. Hence Marx’s need to put forward the notion of ‘practical consciousness’ as a fundamental moment of all aspects of ‘concrete’ form of existence. In this learning, changing and transmitting process life goes on, history moves on and is made – both consciously and subconsciously. The gesture of forging a primitive tool, adding two sticks together, judging the seasons by stars, becomes the science and technology of our present times. In this schema no apple falls out of sight of a conscious eye. It is not surprising then that private property based ways of establishing propriety and reproducing difference would be a basic part of social existence involving consciousness and institutionalization. Viewed thus, “race” is no more or less than a form of difference, creating a mode of production through practical and cultural acts of racialization. “Race” is such a difference and it can not stand alone.

If this formative integrity or ‘unity’ of the social is ‘ruptured’ (to use another of Marx’s phrases in Grundrisse), then we have phenomenal object forms or thought objects which are fetishized. The work of Marxist theorists is to deconstruct this object form and return it to its concrete diverse social determinations. As Lukačs puts it, an ontology of social being can only be appropriately understood with an epistemology which connects thought to its material socio-historical ground (see Lukačs, 1980, especially pp 99-137). As
such, empiricist or positivist versions of marxism will not do because they tend to depict the concrete as no more than a ‘thing’ or an ‘object’, as a dead ‘fact’.

Attempts to rupture mutually constitutive and diverse determinations to present this as reality lead to the kind of problem that bedevils social movements which for their effectiveness ought to integrate “race”, gender and class. Unintentionally, we produce reified thought objects which defy social understanding and are occlusive or truncated. We confuse the specificity of social forms or figurations with disconnected particularities. Thus culture becomes non-material, asocial, solely discursive, while economy or polity lack mediatory forms of consciousness. As pointed out earlier, this fractured reading results in ideology, in bourgeois democracy’s claim to offer equality of citizenship or rights while legally preserving and enhancing actual social relations of inequality and ruling. It is in the criticism of this bourgeois political economy that Marx repeatedly elaborates his theory of a mode (as style, fashion, ensemble) of production. In opposition to liberal/bourgeois thought he shows how each specific social form serves as the microcosm of the social macrocosm, just as each physical cell of the body holds the entire genetic code. Such a mode of understanding is anti-dualist and anti-positivist. The mode of production, as he puts it in the *Grundrisse*, is not “linearly, causally organized” (Marx, 1973: 97). By employing the notion of mediation, between social relations and forms of consciousness, both practical and ideological, he shows how an entire significatory/communicative and expressive social ensemble must obtain for any specific economy and polity to
operate and be effective. Seen thus ‘socially’, class can not be genderless or cultureless, or culture genderless and classless.

It is obvious that capital is a social practice, not just theoretical abstraction. As such its reproductive and realization processes are rooted in civil society, in its cultural/social ground. Class in this sense, for Marx and others, is a category of civil society. The exploitation of labour is not simply an arithmetical ratio of labour to technology in the terrain of means of production. Social and cultural factors, for example of gender and “race”, enter into it and with their implied norms and forms organize the social space which comprehends capitalism as a mode of production, an organization of civil society. We enter a realm of extensive and subtle mediations which determine forms, values, processes and objects of production. Therefore ‘class’, when seen concretely, both relies upon and exceeds what we call economy. The once vocal debates on household labour of women, wages for housework, and relationship of slavery to capitalism revealed the far-flung socio-cultural roots of economy. Thus we might identify “race” and patriarchy/gender with the so-called extra-economic or cultural/discursive, nonetheless social, moments of the overall mode of capitalist production which has its own social ontology. It is to this formative relation between production and reproduction that Marx signals when he speaks of mediation as “the act through which the whole process again runs its course”. (Marx 1973: 94) As modes of mediation gender or “race”, therefore, not only help to produce the constant devaluation of certain social groups’ embodiment and
labour power, but also create a ‘colour coded’ cultural commonsense for the state and the society as a whole (see Backhouse, , Razack, 2002).

The epistemology which ruptures the integrity of the socially concrete at a conceptual level and posits this as a property of the social is identified by Marx in *The German Ideology* as ‘ideology’. In contrast to much marxism familiar to us, he does not consider ideology only in terms of its thought content, but considers the very form of knowledge production that generates such content which desocializes, depoliticizes and dehistoricizes our social understanding. Though Marx’s primary concern is with the precise method which produces ideology, he is deeply concerned also with the thought content or ideas that are generated. As they are ideas of ruling, they need to be specifically addressed by our political organizations. As such, racializing discourses need to be considered in these terms. In a section entitled “Ruling class and ruling ideas”, Marx states:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. 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. (1970: 64)
After offering this cryptic, though highly suggestive view of how ‘cultural commonsense’ for domination is created which legitimates and reproduces the overall relations and institutions of ruling, Marx states categorically that “ruling ideas”, or what we call generally prevalent ideas, “are nothing more than the ideal [i.e. cultural/formal] expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance.” (64) It is not surprising that the dominant relations of patriarchal colonial capitalism would produce racist patriarchal discourses of physical, social and cultural differences. This is exactly what happens when the discourses or ideological categories of “race” or ‘human nature’ are employed to ‘explain’ social behaviour or cultural characteristics which in actuality no more than interpret them.

But most importantly, the question is how such occlusive, substitutive or displacing discourses of ideological categories are generated. In *The German Ideology* Marx outlines this epistemological practice, connecting it with the social division of manual and mental labour. He exposes the disciplinary practices of metaphysicians whereby everyday ideas, events, experiences are decontextualized, overgeneralized or overparticularized from their originating social relations and interests. Then these empirical bits of de-grounded ideas are reconfigured into discursive systems or interpretive devices which take on a semblance of independence and substantiveness. It is helpful to actually both paraphrase and quote Marx here. Considering
ideology to be an epistemological device employed in decontextualization and extrapolation, Marx offers us a disclosure of the method. He calls them “tricks” and there are three of them. We can begin by “considering the course of history” by “detach[ing] the ideas of the ruling class from the ruling class itself and attribute to them an independent existence” (65). Having detached them from their specific social and historical locations we now “confine ourselves to saying that these or those ideas were dominant at a given time, without bothering ourselves about the condition of production and the producers of these ideas… “ (65). Now we have a set of ideas or discourses independent of their social ontology. They appear to generate each other, appear even *sui generic*, but are claimed to be shaping, even creating, the very social realities that gave rise to them in the first place. Thus consciousness gives rise to existence, rather than existence to consciousness, understood as conscious existence. Life imitates or illustrates theory. Only “…if we ignore the individuals and world conditions which are the source of these ideas…”, says Marx (65), then we truly produce “ideology”. We can blithely forget that notions such as honour and loyalty came to being in the time of aristocracy and the dominance of the bourgeoisie produced concepts of freedom or equality (65). So “increasingly abstract ideas hold sway, i.e., ideas which increasingly take on the form of universality” (65). Hiding behind abstract universality, time honoured metaphysicality, ideas of ruling, for example of “race” or gender, represent their interests “as the common interest of all members of society…” (65).
Intellectuals or ideologues organic to a system of ruling, guardians of property relations, then take upon themselves the task of development and systemization of these decontextualizing concepts. We know well of the amount of philosophical, ‘scientific’ and cultural labour that have gone into the production of “race”, and of practices that have gone into racialization of whole legal systems and polities. Needless to say, diverting attention from power organized differences in everyday life, history and social relations can only be useful for the purpose of ruling, of hegemony, not of resistance.

Ideological forms masquerade as knowledge. They simply produce discursivities incorporating bits of decontexted ideas, events or experiences with material consciousness of a practical kind. The modus operandi of these ‘ruling knowledges’ relies on epistemologies creating essentialization, homogenization (i.e., de-specification) and an aspatial and atemporal universalization. As ideology’s one most powerful trick is to cut off a concept from its originating and mediating social relations, used in such a way even critical and resisting concepts, such as ‘class’ or the feminist category of ‘woman’, can become occlusive and serve the interest of ruling relations through exclusion and invisibility of power in relations of difference. The world of feminist theory has been riven by struggles in which it became evident that the category of ‘woman’ in its desocialized (class/”race”) and dehistoricized (colonialism and imperialism) deployment has helped to smuggle in middle class white women’s political agenda and hidden the relationship of dominance which some social groups of women hold with regard to other social groups.
Conclusion

Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. (Marx 1972e: 437)

What, we might ask, are the consequences of the ideological practice of dissociation of “race”, class and gender which both marxists and non-marxists have engaged in? As far as social movements are concerned this has made them largely ignore the task of fashioning a fully socially-informed politics. For marxists their ideological/economistic reading of class, the habit of separating class from culture and social relations of gender/patriarchy, has succeeded in creating at best compromised petty bourgeois politics. By dubbing the issue of “race” as a non- or anti-class one, they have marginalized those sections of the people who are the most dispossessed and who provide the fodder for capital both in the West and elsewhere. Thus issues of “race” and gender have become mainly identified with liberal politics, with those of rights and citizenship, not of socialist struggles. Labour movements and whatever is left of the women’s movement are thus unrepresentative and incomplete social or anti-capitalist movements, and as such participate in replicating the organization of capital and bourgeois rule.

Another consequence has been a promiscuous mixture or coalition of class, gender and “race” based politics whose lack of common understanding and
of internal constructive grounds have created only tenuous possibilities of association and acrimonious relations. Furthermore, an inability to create socialized class or anti-capitalist movements has given room for the development of culturalist “race” groups which, with the help of official multiculturalism, have held social movements hostage to ‘identity’ and fundamentalist politics. The oppressions created by unequal, dominating social relations do not disappear through being rendered invisible as such. They do not disappear in actuality. Denuded of their full socio-historical concreteness or reality at both civil society and state levels, they surface in ideological forms of reified “race” and ethnic nationalist identities or in acts of basic despair and desperation.

The best way to understand this destructive politics of ideology is to remember Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where he speaks of displaced, substituted cultural identities that accomplish the work of class rule on the stage of hegemony. The masks of god that are worn by current fundamentalist political agencies can only serve to remind us of the Roman masks worn by successive protagonists of the French revolution – until the excluded, unintegrated, class based socio-cultural forms/identities abetted in a fascism instead of social emancipation. Present day nationalism, imperialism and official multiculturalism have all resorted to ‘identity’ politics and unleashed wars, genocides and general social oppression and surveillance. Bush’s and Blaire’s civilizational or christian utterances, their capitalist and militaristic ambitions masquerading in the masks of democracy and freedom, or their collaborating feminist discourses of rescuing muslim women, are devastating ideological
identity projects. It is only by practicing a ‘concrete’ social analysis that these
legitimating, unificatory sleights of hand that have drawn a large section of North
Americans (mostly white) to identify with various myths of domination, can be
challenged.

The marxists in the West, in particular because they call for a social
politics, need to take heed of their own implication in undercutting class struggle
by furthering ‘identity’ politics through their defensiveness or ‘tolerant’ liberalism
with regard to “race”. Being quick to dismiss much popular anger at social
injustice as peripheral to anti-capitalist or class struggle, they have adopted a path
which can not bring any ‘real’ social transformation. An inability to regard
colonial capitalist and imperialist politics as racist and colonialist ‘identity’
politics of the last five hundred years has rendered western marxists politically
ineffectual. If antiracist feminist movements challenging hegemony have an
element of recuperation of erased cultural identity in them that is not in and of
itself necessarily disastrous. The major point is to assess from what standpoint
this so-called ‘identity’ is elaborated and what cultures, histories and social
relations it evokes. Whose identity are we talking about – that of the oppressors or
the oppressed? Theorists of the left or marxists have no reason to fear ‘identity’,
because there is enough ground in the works of Marx himself to create social
movements which do not have to choose between culture, economy and society or
“race”, class and gender in order to organize politics of social revolution. Going
beyond gestures of intersectionality, coalition and social cohesion, marxists have
recourse to a non-fragmentary understanding of the social which could change the world as we know it.

References


Smith, B., Hull, G. and Bell Scott, P. 1982. *All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave*. New York: The Feminist Press.


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1 For the beginning of theorization on the relationship between “race”, gender and class, which forms the departure point for this essay, see Davis (1983), Bannerji (1993, 1995), Barbara Smith (1982), Silvera (1983)  
2 The notion of ‘intersectionality’ is the most common one used in critical race theories as well as in legal theories. See, for example, Crenshaw (1989), Hill Collins (1998).  
4 There needs to be an examination of Canadian labour history or texts of labour studies to see how “race” in its various forms has been incorporated in theorizing class, labour or class politics. It would be interesting to see if, in that domain, there are texts comparable to *The wages of whiteness*, Roediger (1992) or *Racial Oppression in Canada*, Li and Bolaria (1988). This is an invitation to further research. Black feminist historians have started the project, but it needs to go deeper.  
5 For example, Metro Network for Social Justice.  
6 For a classic example of this formulation see Laclau and Mouffe (2001).  
7 By this I mean anthologies such as *The empire strikes back* (Birmingham 1982)  
8 For an understanding of my use of the term “specific” see Bannerji, “Introducing racism” (41-54) in Bannerji (1995).  
9 Marx (1970:121). Additionally, my use of the notion of ‘the social’ needs a note, an acknowledgment of the debt I owe not only to Marx’s work but to that of Dorothy E. Smith, who in all her works, but primarily in *Writing the social* (1999), has offered a relational and constitutive view of it. Also in D. Smith (1990), in essays such as “Ideological practices of sociology”, Smith has elaborated on Marx’s and her own ‘reflexive’ method. See also Bannerji, “But who speaks for us?” in Bannerji (1995).  
10 In his First Thesis Marx says: “The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism…is that the thing, reality, sensuousness is conceived only in the form of the object or contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively… [and] the active side was developed abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such.” (1970:121, author’s emphasis)  
11 Two interesting formulations of this exclusionary method are to be found in now classic texts, Spelman (1988) and B.Smith (1982).  
12 In this book Thompson socializes the concept of class, thus retrieving it from economism. He introduces into the social relational aspect the element of conscious subjectivity. ‘Class’ for him is an “active process which owes as much to agency as to conditioning. The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present in its own making.” (9) Also I coincide with this statement that class is “a
historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness.” (9)

13 See Althusser and Balibar (1973), especially Althusser’s considerations on science and theory, in part 1, “From capital to Marx’s philosophy, 48-70.

14 Gramsci (1971). Especially attend to his treatment of the relationship between the state and the civil society in the different essays.

15 For the implication of ‘proprietary’ or moral notions, as well as familial relations, and for a reflexive/constitutional view of the social, see classic statements by Marx (1970: 26, 44, 49, 52), where discussing family as a moment of property he says, for example, it is “the first form…where wife and children are the slaves of the husband”. See also Marx and Engels (1972a) or Marx and Engels (1972b). Later theorizations retain the core of their insight. In North American context Angela Davis (1983) is a good example.

16 For an expanded discussion of ‘civil society’ see Marx (1970: 57-60), and also “History: Fundamental conditions” (1970: 48-52). Both involve discussions on the construction of the social where the organization of social relations involve all basic aspects of life, including that of consciousness. Here production and consumption are unthinkable in separation and without an intrinsic, active and material form of consciousness.

17 Along with discussing “primary historical relationships”, Marx speaks of “consciousness...which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language. Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness arises, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men.” (1970: 51, author’s emphasis)

18 For a clear understanding of the concept of difference Gates (1985) is particularly useful. Though the authors of the essays are not marxist, they provide examples of cultural materialism with a strong basis in cultural history.

19 See, for example, Hegel’s view of ‘civil society’ in C. J. Arthur’s introduction to Marx (1970: 5)

20 On the importance of the concept of mediation, see Marx (1973: 331-333).

21 This ideological process that Marx talks about is addressed in different ways by, for example, Harding (1993) or Dua and Robertson (1999)

22 This issue has been also addressed in postcolonial feminist writings. See Midgeley (1998), Vron Ware (1993) and McClintock (1995).