

MATERIALIST FEMINISM AND THE POLITICS OF DISCOURSE

Rosemary Hennessy

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For Molly and Kate

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Introduction

One of the foremost issues—perhaps even *the* issue—western feminism faces in the nineties is the impact of the general crisis of knowledge on its historical subject. This crisis of authority has intensified anxiety around the category “woman,” an anxiety which has to a greater or lesser extent haunted bourgeois feminism from its inception in the form of questions about the woman—or women—feminism speaks for. In some instances, questioning feminism’s claim to speak for all women has led to fears that dismantling the identity “woman” may well lead to the dissolution of feminism itself. At the same time, the myriad forms of violence against women, the persistent worldwide devaluation of femininity and women’s work, and the intensified controls over women’s sexuality and reproductive capacities are daily reminders of the need for a strong and persistent feminist movement. Surely feminist critique of the systematic oppression of women is still necessary, perhaps more now than ever. The challenge is to find ways to anchor feminist analysis in our recognition of the continued brutal force certain social totalities like patriarchy and racism still exercise, at the same time acknowledging that the social construction of “woman” is never monolithic. Over the past decade materialist feminist theory has been in the forefront of the effort to take up this challenge.

In the late 1970s materialist feminism emerged from feminist critiques within marxism. Working in critical engagement with the formation of the New Left in Britain and France especially, materialist feminist work contributed to the development of theories of patriarchy and ideology, elaborating more specific understandings of the relation between the operation of power in the symbolic order and in other material practices. Annette Kuhn, Anne Marie Wolpe, Michele Barrett, Mary MacIntosh, and Christine Delphy were among the initial promoters of “materialist feminism,” favoring that term over “marxist feminism” on the basis of an argument that marxism cannot adequately address women’s exploitation and oppression unless the marxist problematic itself is transformed so as to be able

to account for the sexual division of labor. With its class bias, its emphasis on economic determinism, and its focus on a history exclusively formulated in terms of capitalist production, classic marxism in the seventies had barely begun to analyze patriarchal systems of power. At the same time, there was a marked tendency in most feminist theory to conceptualize woman in essentialist and idealist terms. In this context, materialist feminism provided a historically urgent ground from which to launch a critical counterknowledge to both feminism and marxism.

By the early eighties a small but growing body of materialist feminist theory from across diverse national boundaries was making use of the insight that subjectivity is discursively constructed to analyze the intersections of gender and class. These analyses served as a powerful critique of mainstream feminism's appeals to individual rights or to a universalized notion of "women's experience," but for the most part they gave priority to the social construction of gender. This tendency to focus exclusively on gender has blunted materialist feminism's effectivity in many areas of oppositional political struggle, however, and in this respect aligned it with much mainstream western feminist work. Over the past twenty years, the voices of women who have found themselves outside the boundaries of that mainstream—women of color, lesbians, working-class, and "third-world" women—have pressured feminism to question the adequacy of a generic "woman" and a gender-centered feminist inquiry. These knowledges draw from (and contend with) the discourses of the postmodern avant-garde which have also rewritten the subject-in-difference by calling into question the empiricist self. The materialist feminism that is circulating in the nineties—in the work of Norma Alarcón, Evelyn Brooks-Higgenbotham, Teresa Ebert, Teresa deLauretis, Donna Haraway, Chandra Mohanty, Toril Moi, Mary Poovey, Chandra Sandoval, and others—has grown out of and been shaped by both of these critiques of identity. Increasingly, materialist feminist analyses problematize "woman" as an obvious and homogeneous empirical entity in order to explore how "woman" as a discursive category is historically constructed and traversed by more than one differential axis.

At a historical moment when the pressures to address difference are often formulated in terms of a logic of inclusion or contingency, when imperatives to abandon systemic thinking and "overarching totalities" in our analysis exert their force from the left and from the right, materialist feminists need to insist on one of the strongest features of feminism's legacy—its critique of social totalities like patriarchy and capitalism—without abandoning attention to the differential positioning of women within them. As a multinational military industrial complex systematically expands its network of exploitative relations of production and consumption, patriarchal and capitalist relations become even more securely imbricated. Witness the growing violence against women in the periphery by corporate research, the increasing sexualization of women internationally by an all-pervasive commodity aesthetics, and the intensified contestation over wom-

an's body as the site of reproduction in the "first world" and of production in the "third world." At the same time that capital's colonization has become more wide-reaching and insidious, oppositional struggles are increasingly confined to regional and isolated sites. As this strategy of localizing extends to many cultural registers and becomes a common mechanism of crisis management, materialist feminists need to attend critically to its effects on the conceptual frameworks which structure our concepts.

This book is not an overview or a genealogy of materialist feminism. It does not offer an introduction to materialist feminism or plot out its organizing concepts. It is, instead, an argument for and within a materialist feminist problematic that takes as its particular focus the problem of the subject—more specifically, the discursively constructed subject. This focus leads me to explore some of the theoretical and political issues that materialist feminism's appropriation of the concept of a discursively constructed subject has raised: whether and how it matters which theory of discourse we work with, for instance, or whether a discursively constructed subject is coherent with feminism's emancipatory aims. Throughout I argue for materialist feminism as a way of reading that need not shrink from naming social totalities in order to address the complex ways in which subjectivities are differentiated. And I present this argument by way of several conceptual—which is to say theoretical, historical, and political—issues it raises for the question of who feminism speaks for.

In naming this nexus of issues "the politics of discourse," I took the risk of invoking a phrase that, in some circles at least, has become almost a cliché. It seems to me, however, that for all of the invocations of "politics" in studies that have addressed the "discursive construction of the subject," we still have very few rigorous theoretical formulations of exactly what these terms mean. This is even more the case when they are combined with another word, also lately in vogue, "materialism." The title, then, is a way of insisting that we cannot shy away from concepts like "politics," "discourse," or "materialism" simply because they are last year's fashion, and now are no longer "hot" or "fresh." Instead we need to continue the hard work of explaining and rewriting them.

Materialist feminism is engaged in this rewriting. Like other reading practices, its ways of making sense of the world *make* sense; that is, materialist feminism affects what gets to count as "reality" through the assumptions it valorizes and the subjects it produces. It is in this sense a discourse that has a definite politics. Even as it takes as its particular focus the elimination of patriarchal power, the assumptions on which materialist feminist theory rests have been forged out of appropriations from an array of discourses—postmodern, marxist, liberal humanist, anticolonialist, anti-racist. In the following chapters I examine how this focus is affected by the various and often contesting discourses materialist feminism appropriates and the issues raised by its appropriation of concepts. Throughout I suggest that the task of redefining who feminism speaks for is intimately bound up with how the discursive construction of the subject is concep-

tualized. This means, in part, that the various theories of discourse we appropriate and how we articulate them into a feminist critical framework have an effect on the sense we *make* of the world—on our feminist politics and the reality it transforms.

I approach this general issue of the politics of discourse by way of several problems. Chief among them is the problem of social analytics—that is, how *the social* is conceptualized in the various theories materialist feminism draws from—and the accompanying question of how to understand the materiality of discourse and of history. The standpoint from which and for which I argue is a much more emphatically postmodern marxist feminism than much recent work in materialist feminism has been willing to embrace. However, to my mind taking the risk of situating materialist feminism's *materialism* more firmly within a postmodern marxist problematic has two crucial positive consequences. It avails feminism of a framework for developing a more rigorous theory of the materiality of discourse—including materialist feminism's own discursivity—and it opens a productive avenue for rethinking feminism's subject.

Implicit in the organization of the book is the assumption that in order for materialist feminism to be a powerful critical intervention in the reformation of the hegemonic subject in the postmodern moment, we have to attend more rigorously to the materiality of knowledge. This means, in part, that we have to inquire into the processes whereby feminism appropriates and reformulates its concepts. If feminist inquiry is not to be a re-enactment of the dominant pluralist paradigm, it needs to make visible the contesting interests informing new knowledges and disarticulate their salient features from analytics that often subvert the aims of feminism's political agenda. In order to foreground the materiality of feminism as a mode of reading, we also need to situate the various facets of a materialist feminist theoretical framework in relation to other contesting materialisms.

For the reader primarily interested in the *feminism* of materialist feminist theory, these efforts may seem belabored "detours" through various marxisms and post-marxisms. Anticipating these objections, I want to emphasize that *materialist* feminism dismisses sustained inquiry into these discourses which also claim to be materialist at the risk of reifying its own historicity. While the extent of my critique of post-marxism in the first two chapters could be improved upon—and no doubt will be in the continuing work of others—if we are going to take seriously the notion that discourses have a materiality, we cannot shrink from rigorous critical assessments of the theoretical paradigms we draw our concepts from.

In order to relate the crisis of feminism's subject to the re-formation of subjectivities in the larger culture now, I begin chapter 1 by situating materialist feminism in the discursive field where it primarily circulates, that is, the postmodern academy. The crisis of knowledge in the academy is increasingly being understood in terms of forces that extend much more broadly than the invasion

of postmodern theories. Provoked by pressures as wide-ranging as shifts in U.S. hegemony and demographics, the technological revolution, and the installation of a service-based economy now in recession, this "crisis" is a struggle over the distribution of wealth and the reimagination of civic identity. Feminism has been one of the primary new knowledges fomenting this crisis, at the same time it has been affected by and helped manage it. The reconfiguration of what and how we know has provoked feminism's critical assessment of who it speaks for, and helped us reimagine the feminist subject as a highly differentiated one, positioned across the multiple axes of race, class, gender, and sexuality. At the same time that feminism's critical edge has been honed by the array of new knowledges loosely identified as postmodern, its relationship to postmodernism has also been contentious. Many postmodern theories have threatened to recuperate feminism's oppositional force. Examining the social logic implicit in the postmodern theories we appropriate—particularly those claiming to be materialist—can enable feminists to assess the extent to which a particular theoretical framework may subvert or enhance feminism's political objectives.

I inaugurate this process of "disarticulating" postmodern materialism in chapter 1, through a critique of the social logics in the work of Foucault and Laclau and Mouffe. Each has important concepts to offer materialist feminism, and yet each frames these concepts within a social logic of contingency, a framework that I argue undermines feminism's critique of patriarchy. Disarticulating some of these concepts—the notion of discursive practice, is one—from a contingent social logic is a first step toward rearticulating them within an alternative *systemic* conception of the social. Theories of ideology post-Althusser are to my mind a very useful instance of systemic analysis for feminist theory now. Conceptualizing discourse as ideology allows us to consider the discursive construction of the subject, "woman," across multiple modalities of difference, but without forfeiting feminism's recognition that the continued success of patriarchy depends upon its systematic operation—the hierarchical social relations it maintains and the other material forces it marshals and is shaped by. It is, moreover, a mode of analysis that is coherent with feminism's commitment to the elimination of exploitation and oppression.

In chapter 2 I turn to the problem of the materiality of discourse as it has been formulated in the work of several post-marxists: Foucault, Kristeva, and Laclau and Mouffe. Each of them has devised materialist theories of discourse which have been extremely influential, particularly for feminist theory, in configuring relations between language and the social. I pay particular attention to Foucault because of the tremendous impact his conception of discourse has had on materialist feminism. Reading Foucault in relation to Kristeva, whose work is usually seen as quite distinct from his, brings into relief certain shared features of their analytics and demonstrates once again "the politics of discourse"—in this case, how the framing of concepts in social theory has a bearing on larger social arrangements. As part of their project of putting forward a conceptual outline for

radical democracy, Laclau and Mouffe's materialist theory of discourse is also relevant to feminists. Their understanding of the formation of a democratic plurality gives a great deal of prominence to political movements, including feminism, and is increasingly being appropriated by materialist critics of culture.

Reading these three theories against each other makes visible unexpected similarities in their analytics: in the relationship between the discursive and the nondiscursive, in their ways of understanding the disruptive "unthought" of culture, in their notions of the body. It underscores the potentially useful ways of conceptualizing the social construction of difference they make possible as well as those they block. Reading them in relation to each other also foregrounds the conservative implications of their theories of discourse, an issue often overlooked in materialist feminist appropriations of their work.

My rewriting of the materiality of discourse for feminism begins with an assessment of feminist standpoint theory in chapter 3. Although not without its shortcomings, this body of work now comprises one of the major feminist contributions to the rearticulation of the subject. It offers a very powerful critical framework for explaining the relationships among knowledge, power, and subjectivity. In this regard, standpoint theory supersedes many of the impasses of liberal and postmodern feminism. However, one of its intractable issues is an often contradictory allegiance to both a discursively constructed subject and an experiential self. The theoretical problem that underlies this contradiction is standpoint theory's failure to explain the material relation between the discursive (feminist critique) and the nondiscursive (women's lives). Drawing critically upon developments in postmodern marxist theory, I argue that understanding discourse as ideology offers a way out of this impasse.

A theory of ideology makes it possible to explain the complex ways social reality is shaped—through the overdetermined relations among mechanisms for making sense, distributing resources, dividing labor, and sharing or wielding power. If we acknowledge, for instance, that discursive struggles over woman's reproductive body in the U.S. now have less to do with women's "choice"—or even with abortion per se—than with the maintenance of a social order in which the few still benefit from the work of many, where power and resources are distributed on the basis of wealth not human worth or need, and women are generally devalued, we can begin to make sense of the contest over abortion from the standpoint of those who are already most affected by the legislation of women's bodies—the thousands of poor women who are also disproportionately women of color. We need critical frameworks that can address these issues and explain the complex ways in which the social marks of difference do not serve as indices of plurality but rather as guarantors of inequity. The causal logic underlying a theory of discourse as ideology makes it possible to acknowledge the systematic operation of social totalities like patriarchy and racism across a range of interrelated material practices. These totalities traverse and define many areas of the social formation—divisions of labor, dimensions of state intervention

and civil rights, the mobility of sites for production and consumption, the reimagination of colonial conquest, and the colonization of the imagination. If feminism as a mode of reading is to confront and explain the highly differentiated positioning of "woman" across densely mediated social practices like these—those spanning the sexualization of the female body in the west and the feminization of colonized peoples, for instance—it cannot relinquish systemic analysis.

Drawing upon elaborations of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, postmodern marxist theories of ideology afford a way to understand the current crisis of feminism as itself an enabling condition for transformative change. As a counter-hegemonic discourse, materialist feminism can provoke and make use of ideological crisis by reading the fault-lines in the texts of culture symptomatically. Symptomatic reading is a practice which makes sense of the gaps in narrative coherence as signs of the dis-ease that infects the social imaginary. Unlike neo-formalist notions of the slippage of signification, however, it historicizes these gaps and reads them as displacements of the broad-ranging contradictions upon which late capital depends. And in so doing it supersedes them with an alternative explanation of social relations. In these respects, it is a form of ideology critique with tremendous potential for materialist feminism.

Understanding feminist practice as ideology critique provides a way to rethink the feminist standpoint not as an experiential ground for knowledge but as a critical practice. In chapter 4 I develop the implications of this notion of standpoint for feminist history. I read several feminist histories by way of a discussion of the discourse of *the new* and its function in helping to manage the symbolic anchors of the social imaginary through times of cultural crisis. Continuing the theme of situating materialist feminism in relation to Foucauldian and French feminist problematics, I examine in some detail two variants of recent feminist work that in different ways offer a "history" of the new woman: the New Woman's History, much of it informed by Foucault, and a group of readings of Freud's *Dora*, heavily inflected by French feminism and psychoanalysis. In reading history as narrative, I give particular attention to the relation between history and theory, the extent to which efforts within feminist history to rewrite the category "woman" are impeded by a lingering empiricism, and to the ways the new feminist history has collaborated with the conservative face of psychoanalysis in managing the current crisis of feminism's subject.

Reading these histories of the new woman from the standpoint of ideology critique has a bearing on how feminists understand their interest in and renarration of "woman." Central to my argument for reading history as ideology is the claim that history, as one of the narratives of a culture, is always an intervention in the present. The political importance of feminist reconstructions of the new woman—either from the late nineteenth century *or* from the late twentieth century—is how they help to shape the ideological uncertainty surrounding "woman" now. From the standpoint of ideology critique, then, feminist history is inextricably bound up with feminist theory and the question of identity. How feminist histories

theorize “woman” has a tremendous effect on who feminism speaks for. To the extent that it can disrupt the hold of an identity politics which continues anxiously to trouble and tame the radical potential of feminist thought, a more fully materialist feminist narrative holds much promise.

As the struggle over how to reimagine the boundaries of social plurality continues into the twenty-first century, feminism offers a crucial and necessary critical standpoint. Inserting the social subject—including feminism’s own subject—into the historical contest over meaning and resources, materialist feminism also reclaims one of the strongest features of feminism’s legacy—its analysis of social totalities—and articulates it with some of the most important insights of postmodernism. Without forfeiting feminism’s specificity, materialist feminism fosters the alignment of a feminist standpoint with other political movements. The creative tensions in this collectivity coupled with an insistence on historicizing help keep materialist feminism vital and open to history. This historicity has taught us that feminism’s vision of democratic possibility is always *provisional* because continually subject to critique. It is in recognition of the constructive power of this ongoing double-move between solidarity and critique that I offer my arguments for materialist feminism here.