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WHY A MATERIALIST FEMINISM IS (STILL) POSSIBLE— AND NECESSARY

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Synopsis — The title of this paper derives from Christine Delphy's (1980) rejoinder to her Marxist critics, formulated at a time when feminist theory was centrally preoccupied with material social inequalities. Since then, we have witnessed the so-called "cultural turn" as a result of which perspectives that focus on social structures, relations, and practices have been sidelined. Not all feminists, however, took this turn, and there have recently been signs of a revival of materialist feminism. In assessing the effects of these theoretical shifts, and in making a case for the continued relevance of materialist feminism, I will focus on the analysis of gender and sexuality. Here, I will argue that a sociologically informed, materialist approach has more to offer feminism than more culturally oriented postmodern and queer perspectives. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

The title of this article is borrowed from Christine Delphy's rejoinder to her Marxist critics: "A materialist feminism is possible" (Delphy, 1980). Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh (1979), among others, had chastised Delphy for making free with Marxism, for borrowing Marx's method and some of his concepts while not staying true to the letter of his texts and, above all, for daring to suggest that the method of historical materialism could be applied to patriarchal productive relations within family households. Significantly, Delphy's affirmation of materialist feminism was made in response to another, more traditionally Marxist, version of materialism. Yet in a very few years many of those who saw Delphy as insufficiently Marxist had abandoned materialist analysis altogether as a result of the so-called "cultural turn," which Michèle Barrett characterised as a shift in feminism's emphasis from "things" (such as women's work and male violence) to "words," to issues of language, representation, and subjectivity (Barrett, 1992). This development, sometimes called the "linguistic turn," is associated with the move, during the 1980s, away from the "modernist" agenda of early second-wave feminism towards postmodern perspectives.

Not all feminists, however, took the cultural turn or embraced postmodernism. Many continued to work within broadly materialist frameworks and to address modernist preoccupations such as the pursuit of liberty, justice, and equality. Moreover, in the early 1990s, when postmodern feminism seemed to have become the established theoretical orthodoxy, materialist feminism began to be revived or perhaps reinvented, especially in the United States (Hennessy, 1993; Hennessy & Ingraham, 1997; Landry & MacLean, 1993). Recently even Judith Butler (1997) has drawn on historical materialism to contest the view that sexual oppression is "merely cultural." Because I wish to argue for the continued importance of materialist perspectives, I welcome this resurgence of interest in material social relations. I am concerned, however, by some of the forms it is taking, in particular the tendency—evident in Butler's (1997) article and elsewhere¹—to reduce the material to capitalist economic relations. This might bring us full circle back to the least productive forms of 1970s Marxism, in which every form of inequality that was not demonstrably functional to capitalism was declared nonmaterial. This is precisely the form of Marxism that Delphy challenged.

Given that the term "materialist" has been claimed from many competing theoretical po-

sitions I should make it clear that I am using it to refer to perspectives deriving from Marx's historical materialism. My own theoretical allegiance is to materialist feminism as it developed in France from the 1970s, and particularly the variant of it associated with Christine Delphy. Materialist feminism originally emerged in opposition both to conventional Marxism and to feminisms of difference. Its exponents included, in addition to Delphy, Colette Guillaumin, Nicole-Claude Mathieu, and Monique Wittig. These were radical feminists in that the object of their analysis was primarily patriarchy rather than capitalism—and they refused to see the former as deriving from the latter—but they saw historical materialism as a method of analysing relations between men and women as social rather than natural.

Materialist feminism is not a form of economic determinism. As Delphy and Leonard (1992) remind us, one of the original strengths of Marx's materialism was that he did not conceive of the economic as an abstract system with its own internal laws, but as a realm of social relations, constructed through social activity. I want to argue for a version of materialist feminism that foregrounds the social—social structures, relations, and practices—but that does not reduce all social structures, relations, and practices to capitalism. From my perspective patriarchal or gendered structures, relations and practices are every bit as material as capitalist ones, as are those deriving from racism, colonialism, and imperialism. And, of course, all these intersect and interact, often in unpredictable and contradictory ways, so that the social order is not some seamless monolithic entity. Hence, adopting a materialist stance does not preclude awareness of differences among women: on the contrary, a full understanding of those differences requires that we pay attention to material social inequalities and everyday social practices. Nor does materialism ignore issues of language, culture representation, and subjectivity, but it does entail locating them in their social and historical context. Above all, materialist feminism does not reduce women's oppression to a single cause; it eschews attempts at totalising grand theory and transhistorical, universalistic claims (see Delphy, 1984, pp. 17–27).

For me, a materialist perspective is necessarily a sociologically informed one; hence, in reasserting the importance of the material and

the social, I am also seeking to reclaim some fundamental sociological insights. My understanding of the social encompasses all aspects of social life, from structural inequalities to everyday interaction. It is concerned with meaning, both at the level of our wider culture and as it informs our everyday social life. It includes subjectivity because our sense of who we are in relation to others constantly guides our actions and interactions and, conversely, who we are is in part a consequence of our location within gendered, class, racial, and other divisions, and of the social and cultural milieux we inhabit.

I will return to these different facets of the social later in the paper. First, however, I will give a very brief and necessarily sketchy outline of the trajectory of the cultural turn, paying particular attention to the issue of gender and the category "women." Finally, I will elucidate my argument further in relation to current debates on gender and heterosexuality.

THE CULTURAL TURN AND THE PROBLEM OF "WOMEN"

Until the early 1980s the dominant perspectives within feminist theory derived from the social sciences and were generally informed by, or formulated in dialogue with, Marxism. It is these perspectives that were displaced by the cultural turn and subsequently brushed aside or dismissed as a source of past errors. Because these theories focused on social structure, analysing women's oppression as the product of a patriarchal and/or capitalist social system, they have often been depicted as flawed by foundationalism and universalism, suspected of being essentialist, racist and heterosexist (see, e.g., Flax, 1990). Yet this early feminist theorising gave feminism some of its most important and lasting insights, most significantly the idea that sexuality and gender are socially constructed, as well as an emancipatory politics of social transformation.

In Britain, and to a lesser extent in the United States, it was Marxist feminists who spearheaded the move away from social structural to cultural, literary, and philosophical theories.² They had been resistant to those perspectives, such as French materialist feminism, which radically reformulated Marxism (Barrett & McIntosh, 1979), but were more receptive to ideas that might extend Marxism's reach with-

out challenging its central tenets. The problem was that Marxism, despite its strengths as a systematic theory of social oppression, could not account for all aspects of gender relations. Even in areas that were within Marxism's traditional remit, notably women's labour, it was difficult to explain why it should be *women* who occupied particular niches in the capitalist order—for example, as reproducers of labour power or a reserve army of labour.

This latter problem was central to the project of the Marxist feminist journal *m/f*, which was launched in 1978. The editors saw the question of "how women are produced as a category" as the key to explaining their social subordination (Adams, Brown, & Cowie, 1978, p. 5). This journal was highly influential in Britain in expanding the boundaries of what counted as Marxist feminism, but it was not a lone voice. Others were becoming interested in ideology, psychoanalysis, and the work of French structuralists such as Althusser, Lacan, and Lévi Strauss (see Coward & Ellis, 1977; Mitchell, 1975). At first, these new approaches remained loosely connected to more traditional forms of Marxism via Althusser's conceptualisation of ideology as relatively autonomous from economic relations. This made it possible to theorise women's subordination as ideological and cultural without having to relate it to the capitalist mode of production. As poststructuralism replaced structuralism, however, the concept of ideology gave way to discourse, and structural analysis to deconstruction. Later, postmodern scepticism about truth claims and metanarratives further discredited the analysis of systematic economic and social oppression. Ultimately, then, these forms of theory led feminists away from a socially grounded materialism altogether.

The issues that precipitated these shifts, however, were well worth pursuing. In particular, the category "women" certainly needed to be problematised rather than taken as given. In the first place, it was important to "denaturalize" women, to emphasise that women were a social and cultural category. Yet within the logic of the cultural turn "women" could only be thought of in limited ways; "women" and the "feminine" were cultural constructs, reproduced through the symbolic or through our psyches, with the emphasis on sexual difference rather than social hierarchy. While some embraced feminisms of difference, others sought a less essentialist deconstructive ap-

proach, treating "women" and "men" as "fluctuating identities" (Riley, 1988) or the binary divide of gender as a "regulatory fiction" to be subverted (Butler, 1990). In so doing, however, they lost touch with material social structures and practices. It became impossible to think of "women" and "men" as *social* categories, products of a structural hierarchy—the perspective that materialist feminists were developing and that questioned, just as radically, the idea that gender categories were natural and presocial (Delphy, 1984, 1993; Wittig, 1992). The cultural turn effectively sidelined this materialist analysis and emptied the concept of gender of its social import as a hierarchical division between women and men.

During the 1980s there was another, compelling, reason for questioning the category "women," in that it served to conceal differences among women and to privilege definitions of womanhood framed from White Western viewpoints. Once this ethnocentrism was exposed it became clear that "women" has never been a unitary category (Brah, 1991). Increasingly it was recognised that feminists needed to confront the complexities of women's lives in a post-colonial era with its global economy, its history of colonial diasporas, and its current labour migrations and displacements of refugees. All of this was taken by some feminists as a further mandate for postmodern theorising, seen as a means of avoiding the exclusions of an imagined universal womanhood (Flax, 1990).

There is no doubt that the ways in which gender intersects with other forms of inequality, especially those founded on racism and colonialism had hitherto been undertheorised. What is more questionable is whether postmodernism provides the best corrective to this situation. Certainly postmodern, postcolonial theorists speaking from the location of the previously marginalized "other" have played a major role in reorienting feminist theory (see, e.g., Spivak, 1987). However, as some critics have noted, many postmodern writings perpetuated the same exclusions as other theories, themselves presumed to speak for the excluded or professed concern with diversity while refusing directly to confront racism (Modleski, 1991; Stanley, 1990).

Postmodernism, moreover, has no monopoly on theorising diversity and complexity. Like Sylvia Walby (1992), I see no reason why social structural analysis, provided it is not crudely reductionist, cannot address the di-

verse locations occupied by women within local and global contexts. There are dangers, too, in turning our backs on structural inequality in the name of scepticism about universalistic truth claims. Those “differences,” which preoccupy postmodernists, are often more than just “differences”—the most significant of them are founded upon real, material inequalities. Institutionalised racism, the heritage of centuries of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism, along with local and global divisions of labour, are at least as important as culturally constituted difference. Moreover, if we neglect the structural, material dimensions of social life, we may risk valorising differences that are products of oppression and inequality. Meera Nanda (1997) makes this point in her critique of ecofeminism in the Indian context. She suggests that celebrating Indian women’s supposed embeddedness in nature fails to question the divisions of labour that accord them this “privileged access to nature,” which consign them to work that is unpaid and unvalued. Ultimately, she argues, this emphasis on cultural difference as a site of resistance to global capitalism, an emphasis that ignores local patriarchal relations, serves to glorify women’s status as underdogs.

Materialist analysis of systematic inequalities is as relevant now as it ever was, and remains necessary to grapple with the complexities of a postcolonial world, with the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and nationality. We live today within a global context characterised by extremely stark and worsening material inequalities—and it is often women who are most disadvantaged by the intersections between global and local exploitation (see, e.g., Mohanty, 1997). Within the wealthy Western nations, too, gender class and racist inequalities are still with us (see Walby, 1997). The “things” that feminists identified as oppressive in the 1970s—male violence, the exploitation of women’s domestic labour, and low-paid waged labour—continue to shape what it means to be a woman, although the precise constraints we face and their meanings for us vary depending on the specific social locations we each occupy.

BACK FROM THE “CULTURAL TURN”?

While many feminists resisted the seductions of the cultural turn, others are beginning to find a way back to materialism. In the 1990s, there were signs of a retreat from the extreme anti-

materialist implications of postmodernism, a recognition of the continued need for a “critique of social totalities like patriarchy and capitalism” (Hennessy, 1993, p. xii). Some of this recent work reaffirms basic Marxist principles (Hennessy & Ingraham, 1997), but some derives from a revisioning of Marxism through the lens of postmodernism. For example, J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996)³ treats Marxist accounts of capitalism as a discursive construction, not to deny the material, but as a means of focusing on contextualised and localised processes and practices. Gibson-Graham suggests that by dismantling the hegemonic representation of capitalism as a monolithic global system we can reveal what this representation conceals: the persistence of noncapitalist processes and practices. In this way she is able to analyse the appropriation of women’s labour within households as a noncapitalist class process. The idea that men appropriate their wives’ labour—deemed heretical by Marxists when Delphy (1977) first expressed it—can now, it seems, be respectably refloated as post-Marxist.

Many materialist feminists, while still favouring structural analysis, have moved away from “grand theory” towards empirically grounded work on specific issues and contexts. These trends are in keeping with Mary Maynard’s (1995) suggestion that feminists should develop what some sociologists have called “middle range” or “middle order” theories.⁴ Such theories bridge the divide between the abstraction of “grand theory,” which is often remote from daily social life, and untheorised empiricism. They focus on the specifics of given social contexts, institutions, and relationships, offering grounded generalisations rather than universalistic, totalising models of entire societies and are more easily integrated with empirical research. Here, the emphasis is on theorising, rather than producing “Theory” with a capital “T.” It suggests a more open, eclectic approach rather than an insistence on theoretical purity, making use of conceptual tools that seem useful for a particular purpose rather than being guided by a dogmatic allegiance to a particular set of concepts. Hence, we can analyse women’s everyday existence and the meanings women give to their lives without losing sight of structural patterns of dominance and subordination.

Empirically grounded theorising that pays attention to the local material conditions of

women's lives is enabling us to see connections between aspects of the social once thought of as discrete spheres of enquiry, such as sexuality and work. For example, Lisa Adkins (1995) has drawn our attention to the sexualisation of women's labour in the service sector. Analyses of gendered labour markets have largely ignored sexuality or, where it has been considered, it is often treated as an aspect of workplace culture unrelated to the gendered structuring of jobs. Her empirical investigations of a hotel and a leisure park enabled her to see that the persistent sexualisation of women's labour—their use as display, the particularities of dress codes, the expectation that coping with sexual harassment from customers was “part of the job”—was far from incidental. This “heterosexualisation” was coded into the gendered division of labour: it was a covert aspect of the “person specification” for particular jobs and the everyday practices of recruitment and work discipline. She is thus able to argue that sexuality may play a much larger part in the structuring of gendered labour markets than is usually assumed.

EVERYDAY SOCIAL LIFE

As we shift our focus to the everyday, localised contexts of women's lives it becomes clear that the material and the social cannot only be understood in terms of social structure. We need also to account for subjectivity and agency; for patterns of gendered interaction in everyday life as well as the institutional hierarchies within which they take place; the ways in which such interaction is endowed with, and shaped by, the meanings it has for participants; the micro levels at which power is deployed and resisted, as well as the macro level of systematic domination. Taking account of all of this requires a level of social analysis that does not reduce every aspect of our lives to an effect of social structure—and that enables us to appreciate the extent to which social structures are themselves perpetuated through human practices.

Displacing the social in favour of the cultural, however, does not necessarily provide the answers. Of course, the social world includes the cultural—but the cultural is not all there is to the social. Whether we define culture narrowly, as the symbolic and representational, or more broadly, as the shared way of life of a given society or community, cultural practices are also social practices. Culture is woven into the social

fabric of our daily lives, and cannot be understood as separable from the social practices and relations in which it is embedded. Yet it was to cultural theories, to linguistic, and semiotic structuralism and then to poststructuralism and postmodernism, that many Marxist feminists turned to explain those aspects of life that conventional Marxism failed to address.

These theories were often sold to feminists as a means of combating essentialist thinking about the human subject and the social and cultural world she inhabits. For example, according to Chris Weedon (1987), poststructuralism reveals that there is no essential pre-social self, that language is not a transparent medium of communication, that meanings shift as they are contested and renegotiated, that knowledge is a social construct rather than a revelation of absolute truth. None of this is news to those with sociological memories reaching back to the 1960s and 1970s, because all of these ideas were, by then, familiar tenets of certain microsociological theories, i.e., theories that focused on the interpretative processes underpinning everyday life rather than on social structure. These included symbolic interactionism and forms of phenomenological sociology, such as ethnomethodology.

These neglected theories may offer feminists a more nuanced understanding of the many facets of social and cultural life, enabling us to relate meaning and subjectivity both to the everyday actualities of women's lives and to the wider social and cultural contexts in which those lives are lived. During the 1970s and early 1980s, these perspectives informed analyses of the social construction of gender and sexuality (Gagnon & Simon, 1974; Jackson, 1978; Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Plummer, 1975; Stanley, 1984) and critiques of mechanistic concepts of “role” and “socialization” (Stanley & Wise, 1983, 1993). A number of feminists continue to work productively within the traditions of interactionist and phenomenological sociology, utilising them to address such contemporary theoretical issues as embodied sexuality and gender (DeNora, 1997; Lindemann, 1997) and gender ambiguity (Kessler, 1998). Although there are some very well-known feminists who have drawn on these theories, such as Dorothy Smith (1987, 1993), work of this kind has generally been a minority endeavour, little known outside sociology.⁵

Why is this? And why, given that these perspectives were available and known to femi-

nists, were they not drawn upon to address the lacunae in Marxist theory that inspired the cultural turn? In part, this was simply because they were not, in the 1970s and early 1980s, in vogue, because their emphasis on everyday social practices was out of tune with the structural analysis predominating at the time. Thus, the critical insights they offered were ignored and later bypassed in favour of newer forms of theorising. For example, interactionists had effectively critiqued the concept of sexual repression by the early 1970s (Gagnon & Simon, 1974), but such arguments were ignored until they were given credibility by Foucault's (1981) critique of the "repressive hypothesis" (see Jackson, 1999). Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna (1978) offered one of the earliest critiques of the sex-gender distinction, arguing that there is no pre-given sex, only socially constituted gender. Following Garfinkel (1967), they saw gender as produced and sustained through a process of performance and attribution (or "reading" of others' embodied being). Again, this was all but ignored. By the time Judith Butler (1990) made the idea of performative gender fashionable, the ethnomethodological roots of this idea had been largely forgotten.⁶

There is another reason why these approaches were not more widely adopted during the cultural turn. Although they offered a social theory of subjectivity, they lacked any ready-made mode of articulation with Marxism—unlike psychoanalysis, which could be linked to the Marxist project via Althusser's (1971) notion that ideology constitutes us as subjects.⁷ Moreover, a sociological conception of subjectivity does not, at first sight, fit with the poststructuralist critiques of essentialism in that it rests upon the idea of a reflexive social self. This idea is sometimes resisted on the grounds that it presupposes a presocial, or pre-discursive "I," which does the work of reflexivity. However, if we take this idea back to its origins in the work of George Herbert Mead (1934), it does not assume an essential, inner "I," but an "I" that is only ever the fleeting mobilisation of a socially constituted self. There is no self outside the social; it exists and comes into being only in relation to the social "other." This self is not a fixed structure but is always "in process" by virtue of its constant reflexivity.

One way in which this reflexive self-construction has been analysed recently is through the idea of gendered and sexual narratives of

self, an idea which has roots in both the sociological tradition of interactionism and in more recent discourse analysis (Jackson, 1998; Plummer, 1995; Whisman, 1996). Such a perspective allows us to think of subjectivity as a product of individual, socially located, biographies—but not in the same sense as the old idea of socialisation where the present, adult self was conceived as a product of a past, child self. Rather, the present significantly reshapes the past as we reconstruct our memories, our sense of who we are through the stories we tell to ourselves and others. Experience is thus constantly worked over, interpreted, theorised through the narrative forms and devices available to us (Jackson, 1998). These cultural resources are, of course, historically specific; hence, particular modes of self-construction become available at different historical moments (Plummer, 1995).

What makes this conceptualisation of the self potentially congruent with a materialist perspective is that it locates individual subjectivities and biographies within specific historical, social, and cultural contexts, linking the self to the actualities of social existence. If we were to be theoretically purist, there might still be a problem in that the symbolic interactionist tradition in which this conceptualisation is rooted does not allow for analyses of social structure. However, in keeping with Mary Maynard's (1995) call for middle-order theorising, for greater pragmatism and eclecticism in our use of concepts and perspectives, we can surely now admit that social life is multilayered, multifaceted, and that contradictory processes are often at work within it. We can see ourselves as located within social structures and cultural categories (of gender, class, and "race," for example), but as nonetheless possessing agency, interpreting events, applying meaning to them, acting on the basis of our everyday, practical knowledge of the world. On this basis, I would suggest that the time is ripe for a reevaluation and development of these microsociological perspectives, building on the contributions of those feminists who have continued to explore their potential for the analysis of subjectivity, meaning, agency, and everyday social practices.

REDEFINING SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

These microsociological perspectives were the original source of the basic idea of social construction and later, in the 1970s, of its applica-

tion to gender and sexuality. It is because this has been forgotten that social constructionism is often mistakenly seen as a more recent, post-structuralist, innovation. These more recent conceptualisations are, I would argue, often not very social at all, and are more accurately characterised as cultural constructionism.

The way in which we conceptualise the social profoundly affects our understanding of the process of social construction—and this is something central to my understanding of the feminist project. Ever since Beauvoir made her famous claim that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (Beauvoir, 1972, p. 295), feminists have argued that femininity is a social and cultural construct rather than a natural one and that there is nothing inevitable about male dominance (or, indeed any other systematic social inequality). If, as I have suggested, the social is many faceted, then so is the process of social construction, involving at least four intersecting levels relating to structure, meaning, everyday practices, and subjectivity. Here I will spell this out in relation to gender and sexuality, areas that have been much contested within feminism and where cultural theories have made a major impact.

At the level of social structure gender is a hierarchical relation, constitutive of social men and social women, sustained through divisions of labour and other means, notably the heterosexual marriage contract. Here, gender intersects with institutionalised heterosexuality, bolstered by law, the state, and social convention. The institution of heterosexuality is inherently gendered; it rests upon the assumed normality of specific forms of social and sexual relations between women and men. Gender is also constructed at the level of meaning, through the cultural distinction between women and men, the unspoken and taken-for granted means by which we embody and recognise each other as women or as men as well as the more overt norms of appropriate femininity and masculinity. Sexuality is socially constructed at the level of meaning through its constitution as the object of discourse and through the specific discourses on the sexual in circulation at any historical moment; these discourses serve to define what is sexual, to differentiate the “perverse” from the “normal” and to delimit appropriately masculine and feminine forms of sexuality. However, meaning is also deployed within and emergent from social interaction,

and hence finds its expression at yet another level—that of our everyday social practices, through which each of us negotiates and makes sense of our own gendered and sexual lives. Here, too, gender and sexuality are constantly in the process of being constructed and reconstructed, enacted and reenacted, within specific social contexts and relationships. Gender and sexuality are thus socially constructed by what embodied individuals actually *do*. Finally, sexuality and gender are socially constructed at the level of subjectivity, through complex social and cultural process by which we acquire sexual and gendered desires and identities (see also Jackson, 1999, pp. 5–6).

What cultural, as opposed to social, constructionism does is to exclude the first level, that of structure, altogether. The all-important hierarchical dimension of gender vanishes from view, as does the ways in which gender hierarchy underpins heterosexuality. Meaning becomes central, but primarily at the level of culture and discourse rather than the meanings actually deployed in everyday social settings. Sometimes practices are included—in Butler’s (1990) discussion of performativity, for example—but rarely are these practices located in any social context. Finally, subjectivity is usually theorised through psychoanalysis that completely abstracts it from its social context. It is this cultural, rather than social, approach to gender and sexuality that has set the agenda for much recent theorising, in particular through the influence of queer theory.

QUESTIONING HETEROSEXUALITY, DESTABILISING GENDER

Queer theory is not particularly easy to define, and indeed, the continued use of the term has been contested. Generally it refers to a form of postmodern theorising influenced by deconstructive and psychoanalytical perspectives and, above all, by Foucault’s (1981) analysis of sexuality. It has tended to concentrate on texts, discourses, and cultural practices rather than on the social conditions under which our sexualities are lived (see Seidman, 1997). In the last decade feminists have also been engaged in debates around heterosexuality, sometimes engaging with queer perspectives, sometimes following quite different paths (Richardson, 1996; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1993). Queer theory and feminism share some com-

mon concerns: both question the inevitability and naturalness of heterosexuality and both assume that neither gender divisions nor the boundary between heterosexuality and homosexuality/lesbianism are fixed by nature. There are also points of divergence between critiques that are primarily feminist and those that are primarily queer, notably that the former take male dominance within heterosexuality as a starting point, whereas the latter are more concerned with destabilising the binary divide which sustains normative heterosexuality.

I have recently argued that an effective critique of heterosexuality must address both heteronormativity and male dominance (Jackson, 1999). I am not, however, proposing a simple synthesis between queer and feminism, but rather an analysis that follows from a materialist feminist understanding of gender as a hierarchical social division rather than simply a cultural distinction (see Delphy, 1993). Gender is pivotal to a critical understanding of heterosexuality. Not only is heterosexuality, by definition, founded on gender polarity, but the binary division between heterosexuality and homosexuality makes no sense without the prior existence of gender; to desire “the same sex” or “the opposite sex” requires gender as a social, cultural, and subjective reality. Without gender, heterosexuality, homosexuality, and lesbianism could not exist (see Jackson, 1996).

In developing this argument I will briefly discuss some aspects of Judith Butler’s work, which can be read as both queer and feminist, and which engages, to some degree, with materialist feminism (Butler, 1990, 1993, 1997). Like most queer theorists, Butler seeks to destabilise heterosexual normativity. She also makes gender central to her analysis but, in keeping with her queer and postmodern perspective, gender figures more as a cultural difference than a social hierarchy. Where her argument is most effective is in revealing the artificiality of gender, its status as a construction with no necessary relationship to particular bodies or sexualities (Butler, 1990). She makes it clear that gender is no ephemeral, voluntaristic performance, that it is coercive and constraining in its effects, that it is no less material for being constructed (Butler, 1993). Yet she discusses the “materialization” of “sexed” bodies almost entirely in terms of norms—but with no sense of where these norms come from or why they reproduce gender divisions or heterosexual hege-

mony (Hennessy, 1998; Ramazanoglu, 1995). The social is thus reduced to the normative and what is normative goes unexplained.

More recently, Butler (1997) has made some concessions to social structural analysis, questioning whether issues of gender and sexuality are “merely cultural.” In so doing she invokes a form of Marxism incorporating Lévi Strauss’s notion of the exchange of women. This, however, brings us back to an ahistorical and functionalist notion of kinship that avoids confronting the historical and cultural specificity of the various social practices through which gender and sexuality are produced (see Fraser, 1997; Hennessy, 1998). Butler does distance herself from Lévi Strauss’s universalism, suggesting that queer studies might be a means of returning to critiques of the family “based on a mobilizing insight *into a socially contingent and socially transformable account of kinship*” (1997, p. 276, emphasis in the original). But what the current structuring of gender and sexuality is contingent on, apparently, is the functionality of the heterosexual family for capitalism! Butler has traced the history of the cultural turn in reverse, back through structuralism to the most reductionist form of Marxism.⁸

Butler also reduces the material to the economic, which as Nancy Fraser points out, denies the materiality of noneconomic social processes (Fraser, 1997). What Fraser fails to notice, however, is Butler’s reduction of the economic to capitalism, to class relations, a reduction which Fraser herself replicates. This strategy conceals the operation of noncapitalist economic processes, such as men’s appropriation of the labour of wives and dependants (Delphy, 1984; Delphy & Leonard, 1992). Hence, neither Butler nor her critics link the oppression of lesbians and gays to the exploitative gender order underpinning institutionalised heterosexuality. This omission is rather surprising given Butler’s early reliance on the work of Monique Wittig, for whom the heterosexual contract is a labour relationship, not just a sexual one, and one that constitutes women and men by their class-like relation to each other (see Wittig, 1992). In focusing on the narrowly sexual, however, Butler (1990) filters out most of Wittig’s materialism (Jackson, 1995). This may help account for the enormous gulf in Butler’s theorising between heterosexuality’s functions (for capitalism), the norms that enforce it (asserted but never fully

explicated), and the performances and performativity through which gender is produced in everyday life.

Gender and heterosexuality are sustained not only through structural hierarchies and social norms, but through our everyday sexual and social practices. The gendered heterosexual order thus requires our continual reaffirmation for its continuance. As ethnomethodologists would tell us, most of the population “do gender” and “do heterosexuality” every day without reflecting critically on that doing. This is accomplished through talk and action, through the embodied practices of dress and demeanour, through active participation in formal institutional settings, through the mundane activities through which our everyday lives are ordered. Cultural approaches (Butler’s and others) ignore not only the social structural underpinnings of gender, which help explain *why* it exists in its current form, but also the everyday social practices that reveal *how* gender and heterosexuality are continually constructed and reconstructed in routine social interaction.

Queer theorists, have, of course, said much about “undoing,” or at least unsettling, the normativity of heterosexuality and gender, of destabilising male/female and hetero-/homosexual binaries. This, however, is by no means the same as thoroughly undoing gender and heterosexuality themselves—doing away with them. Butler’s performative subversions, for example, are not so much undoing gender as doing it in new ways (Butler, 1990).⁹ Transgressive sexual and gender performances, moreover, can have little social effect without an erosion of material inequalities associated with gendered divisions of labour and resources and a dismantling of the institutions through which heterosexuality’s privileged place in society is sustained.

There is another problem inherent in much current cultural thinking on gender. Because of the preoccupation with deconstructing binaries, the subversion of gender is widely thought of as a multiplication process: making the boundaries between genders more fluid and creating more genders by moving between and combining elements of the existing two. This does not challenge gender itself: you do not subvert a hierarchy by introducing more ranks between the dominant and subordinate. Moreover, it draws back from the implications of a social constructionist understanding of gender, assuming that the whole of human potential equals the sum of

its gendered parts—that all we can achieve is a remix of identities and subjectivities constructed through gender division. From a more sociologically informed, materialist perspective this cannot be the case. If human beings are social beings, then what we are depends on the society and culture we inhabit. If men and women are products of a hierarchical relation, in the absence of that relation very different subjectivities, identities, and desires might emerge—and these would have nothing to do with gender.

CONCLUSION

As Christine Delphy has commented, “we shall only really be able to think about gender on the day we can imagine nongender” (Delphy, 1993, p. 9). Much of what passes as radical these days is more limited in vision, so that the end of gender hierarchy and the collapse of institutionalised heterosexuality appear unthinkable. If we are unable to imagine the social world as radically other than it is we restrict our ability to think critically about it. To make this imaginative leap we need to see the social order we inhabit more clearly, to remove the blinkers the cultural turn has imposed upon our vision. We can never, of course, focus on everything at once, never expect to grasp the full, kaleidoscopic, shifting complexity of the social and cultural world, but we can collectively try to see more. If we succeed, we may recover feminism’s transformative vision and restore our ability to imagine the unimaginable: not only a world without gender, but also a world without the myriad inequalities and injustices that constrain women’s lives today.

ENDNOTES

1. Materiality has quite other connotations in Butler’s earlier work. In *Bodies that Matter* (1993) she discusses the processes whereby bodies are materialised within a Foucauldian framework and here the social and material is conceptualised as normative rather than economic.
2. For an account of similar theoretical shifts from a U.S. perspective see Hennessy and Ingraham (1987). They argue that what has emerged is a post-Marxist feminism, characterised as cultural materialism, which denies systematic oppression in favour of a focus on the local and contingent, on culture, representation, and the body.
3. This is a singular authorial voice adopted by two feminists writing collaboratively. For convenience, I write of them “as if” they are one person.
4. Maynard borrows this idea from Robert Merton (1968). She is well aware of some of the problems of Merton’s

work, but argues that this particular concept is nonetheless useful for feminists.

5. These perspectives can readily be integrated with more recent conceptualisations, such as the Foucauldian notion of discourse (Jackson, 1993; Plummer, 1975), but this ease of assimilation may contribute to their continued invisibility: they are sometimes interpreted as post-structuralist, as in Deborah Lupton's (1998) reading of my (1993) article on love.
6. Butler, of course, does not cite either Garfinkel or Kessler and McKenna. It is not possible to ascertain whether she drew on their ideas or arrived at her analysis by other means.
7. Althusser's ideas, as I have already indicated, played a crucial role in the shift from structural Marxism to post-Marxism and poststructuralism.
8. A much more nuanced Marxist analysis has been developed by Rosemary Hennessy (1995, 1998, 2000).
9. Her reflections on a lesbian femme's claim that she likes her "boys to be girls" (Butler, 1990, p. 122) are illustrative of this.

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