Performing the Self: Subjectivity, Feminist Theory, and Political Praxis

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

PERFORMING THE SELF:
SUBJECTIVITY, FEMINIST THEORY,
AND POLITICAL PRAXIS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

BY
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Preface

In this dissertation I examine the relationship of various concepts and theories of subjectivity to political praxis. Specifically this dissertation seeks to determine which concept of subjectivity is most useful for grounding an emancipatory feminist politics. My central thesis is that the postmodern feminist conception of subjectivity that conceives the subject as performative is precisely the conception of subjectivity most adequate to the project of emancipatory politics.

Philosophy has long been concerned with the relationship of theory and practice. By looking at the relationship of theories of subjectivity to the practice of emancipatory politics, this dissertation aims to advance our understanding of this complex relationship. Of particular concern are the concepts of gender and patriarchy, concepts basic to feminist theory. Philosophers have traditionally ignored gender in defining subjectivity, and have overlooked patriarchy as a system of structural domination. By specifically examining the contribution that feminist theory makes to our understanding of the relationship between theories of subjectivity and political praxis, I hope to contribute to an understanding of the role gender plays in
our conception of subjectivity and how this relates to an emancipatory political praxis aimed at disengaging ourselves from patriarchy. (An assumption upon which this dissertation is built is that patriarchy is indeed an oppressive system from which liberation is necessary. This assumption will not be defended in the dissertation, although the legitimacy of making such normative claims will be addressed.)

The structure of this dissertation is as follows. In Chapter One I offer a critical examination of certain key elements in the thought of Karl Marx, the great theorist of revolutionary social transformation. Specifically, I examine Marx's conception of human nature, the Marxian account of the relationship between private property and gender (drawing here primarily on Engels), and Marx's conception of revolution. In this chapter I am critical of many aspects of Marxism, but I argue that Marxism and postmodernism should not necessarily be seen—as they most often are seen, especially by Marxists—as antithetical.

In Chapter Two I critically examine some basic tenets of the thought of Sigmund Freud. I examine Freud's structural model of the mind, his discussion of female sexuality and gender construction, and his metanarrative of the development of civilization. I argue that Freud offers a useful critique of Enlightenment rationalism, and that his complex and multidetermined model of the mind is important, including his theory of the unconscious. Ultimately,
however, I am highly critical of Freud's ideas about female sexuality and gender, and conclude that Freud remains complicit with patriarchy throughout his work.

In Chapter Three I begin an explicit discussion of postmodern theory with an analysis of Michel Foucault. I start with Foucault's critique of Marx and Freud. I then examine Foucault's genealogical method, the "repressive hypothesis," his analysis of truth, power, subjectivity, and resistance. I conclude that Foucault's discussion of constructed subjectivity, and his contention that subjectivity itself is a site of politics opens a place for postmodern feminist theory. Ultimately, however, Foucault does not adequately develop the gendered aspects of subjectivity, nor does he discuss how a specifically feminist emancipatory politics can emerge from his work. Chapter Three ends with a defense of Foucault against Nancy Fraser's criticism that his position lacks an adequate normative grounding for an ethical politics praxis.

In Chapter Four I discuss Jane Flax. I begin with her analysis and critique of Marx, Freud, and Foucault. Next I discuss her concept of the multiple self, her critique of rationality, and her alternative conception of justice. While in many ways Flax's project is similar to my own, I argue that she ultimately reifies dichotomous thinking by discussing psychoanalysis, postmodernism, and feminism as separate discourses, often opposing them to each other. I
conclude that Flax's concept of subjectivity as fluid and multiple is useful to postmodern feminist theory, and that she enriches this postmodern conception of subjectivity with psychoanalytic insights.

In Chapter Five I examine Judith Butler, a postmodern feminist philosopher. I begin by discussing Butler's critical examination of what is traditionally thought of as political praxis and who is considered the subject of politics. I go on to analyze Butler's treatment of universality, and then her key concept, the "performative self." I argue that the concept of first articulated by Foucault as the constructed self and then developed by Butler into the performative self is the most useful for grounding an emancipatory feminist politics. By deconstructing the ontologically grounded subject, performative theory allows for the practical and strategic enactment of various subject positions and thus provides us with the necessary tools for carrying out various emancipatory political strategies. (It insists, however, that we always examine the political implications and the exclusionary practices that this strategic employment entails).

In the final section of Chapter Five I address Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser's criticism of Butler. Benhabib criticizes Butler for having an inadequate concept of agency. She also claims that performativity is overly
Fraser criticizes Butler for employing anti-humanist language, for offering an inadequate theory of liberation, and for lacking normative grounds on which to secure her politics. I defend Butler against these criticisms.

In my concluding chapter I address an array of standard criticisms which are leveled against postmodern philosophy generally, and which, therefore, could be addressed to the theory I have advocated. I choose as representative of politically-committed critics of postmodernism the Marxist theorists Ellen Meiksins Wood and Terry Eagleton. I offer a close reading of recent works of each, and conclude that their criticisms do not hold up under scrutiny.

My director, David Schweickart, through his exciting, politically engaged scholarship and wonderful teaching, was a mentor and a role model of what a philosopher is. I wish to thank him for his guidance and inspiration throughout my graduate career, and particularly for his generosity with time and energy in directing this dissertation. I gratefully acknowledge Pamela Caughie for introducing me to what ultimately became my area of specialization: postmodern feminist theory. She has provided years of invaluable and inspiring discussion and friendship. I also wish to thank David Ingram for his useful comments on my dissertation and for his friendship as well. I thank my parents, Paul and Bella Dolinko for teaching me to value learning and for
inspiring me to always strive to attain my goals. I also thank my husband's parents, Sonny and Bob Weiner, for always supporting and believing in me throughout the time I have been in graduate school. Finally and most importantly I wish to thank my husband, Joel Weiner, for his love, patience, intelligence, kindness, and humor. It was his unwavering belief in me that always kept me going throughout this project. It is to him that I dedicate this dissertation.
Chapter One

Marx

This chapter on Marx is written with a specific aim in mind. It will not attempt to deal with the whole of Marxian thought. Specifically I will look at Marx's concept of human nature, and how this is connected to his theory of social intervention: namely revolution.¹ I will not address the entirety of these two topics, but rather will look at them with the aim of comparing them to Freud and Foucault, and of showing how Marxian concepts come to be criticized and expanded on by contemporary postmodern feminist philosophers.

Marx and Human Nature

In analyzing Marx's conception of human nature, I draw primarily on Marx's early writings, since this notion is addressed more systematically there than anywhere else. There are, of course, many controversies in this area. In my view, three of the best commentaries here are Bertell Ollman, Richard Schmitt and Carol Gould. I will build on

¹While some interpreters of Marx argue that there are significant differences between his view and those of Engels, others say that they are primarily interchangeable. (Bertell Ollman maintains the latter position.) In this work I will not attempt to distinguish between the two views.
their analyses.

In this section I will argue that Marx's theory of revolution is grounded in an Enlightenment concept of subjectivity. Although Marx conceives of the individual as "an ensemble of social relations," a concept with postmodern resonances, his agent of change, the proletariat, is conceived of as a unified locus of revolt that can overthrow a unified locus of oppression. In this section I will show that while Marx, and some scholars of Marx, give the interpretation of subjectivity a nuanced and contextual dimension, ultimately Marx's subject is confined within the Enlightenment tradition and is a genderless, rational agent. It will be seen that Marx does have a conception of a socially constructed self, but unlike the postmodern conception of constructed subjectivity there is an essential core to Marx's socially constructed self, which is then shaped by external conditions. In other words, most postmodern theorists argue that the self is decentered and socially constructed: There is no core element that is then shaped and molded by social and power conditions; the whole self is a constructed self. For Marx the self has, in a sense, a double core. There is a core common to all human beings at all times, and there is a core element, common to all people in the same social circumstances. For him social circumstances are defined by economic conditions. He does not look at how, for example, gender and race affect and are
affected by social circumstances. Thus he can assume all people of the same class will develop the same consciousness. According to the Marxian theory of subjectivity, there is a core self which is acted upon. In contrast, postmodern theory argues that the action itself produces the subject.

Marx examines human nature in order to look at the possibility for social transformation. He was, as Engels said at his graveside, "a revolutionist." The thesis of this dissertation is that the way in which we conceive of human nature sets limits on what type of social transformation we think is possible. In his discussion of Marx Schmitt supports this thesis: "Marx and Engels studied the process of social transformation. They were interested in human nature because that 'nature' sets limits on the sorts of changes that are possible." Marx's conception of human nature delimits his theory of emancipatory politics. In understanding Marx, it is therefore essential to examine together his theory of human nature and his theory of politics.


3Ibid., 12.

4About Marx's theory of human nature, Bertell Ollman writes: "Human nature is most often treated as a cipher in Marx's system or described with a few simple adjectives. In those instances where it is taken as a significant variable, it has never been sufficiently integrated with Marx's other
Marx does not study subjectivity and human nature in the abstract; rather his subject is always situated within a specific historical, economic, and political environment. There are some aspects of human nature, however, that Marx says are common to all people at all times: the possession of "certain powers and needs, some of which he calls 'natural' and others 'species'." According to Ollman, this distinction between "natural" and "species" is that on which Marx rests his entire theory of human nature. Natural powers (Kraft) are those that humans share with every living thing. Species powers and needs (Bedurfnis) are possessed only by humans. In this way Marx sets humanism apart from naturalism. Humanity itself is seen by Marx as a process of development from completely natural beings guided only by natural powers to fully human beings guided by species powers. Thus for Marx humanity is a process of becoming, and this becoming of humans is the movement of history. This idea of humanity as becoming is seen in Marx's conception of power.

"'Power'. . . suggests potential, the possibility—particularly in changed conditions—of becoming more of whatever it already is. As elements in Marx's conception of reality, powers are related to their own future forms as well as to other theories." Bertell Ollman Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society (Cambridge: At The University Press, 1971), 75.

5 Ibid., 76.

6 Ibid.
entities in the present. . . . Marx sees them in the process of change and, through a study of their organic law, knows in a general way what they are changing into. At each stage their progress can be charted by the evidence of the individual's skills and achievements. ⁷

Human development can be measured by the extent to which humans realize their species powers; human history is the progression of these powers. This is what Marx means when he writes, "The forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present." ⁸ The way in which people realize these powers is the way in which people relate to nature.

While power is a faculty, ability, function, or capacity, needs are drives or desires often for things that are not readily available. According to Marx, people become aware of their powers through their needs. Marx says "the production and satisfaction of these needs is an historical process." ⁹ The progress of history can thus be measured by the progress of human needs.

According to Marx, each stage in history creates its own distinctive needs in man, and with the passing to the next stage these needs disappear, along with their owners, to be replaced by new

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⁷Ibid., 77.


people and new needs.\textsuperscript{10}

This is what is meant by Marx's "material dialectic". As people progress from natural beings to species beings, they work within nature, and they transform nature. In the process of transforming nature, they create new needs, which they then transform nature to realize. This is why Marx says that in communism people are rich in needs, because it is in the creation of needs that humans expand their power. As they transform nature, they realize the capacity of their powers.

People's powers, according to Marx, exist in them as "tendencies and abilities, impulses" (Anlagen und Fahigkeiten, als Trieb).\textsuperscript{11} It is in the creation of needs that these powers are increasingly actualized. According to Marx, this process of developing needs and powers is the process of becoming human. Richard Schmitt writes:

Here, then, is Marx and Engels' conception of human nature: At any particular historical stage, human beings have certain specific material needs that they meet in particular ways and with very specific forms of social organization. As the ways change in which needs are met, the needs themselves as well as the forms of social organization change. One result of those changes is that human nature itself changes.\textsuperscript{12}

For Marx what makes us human is that we produce our

\textsuperscript{10}Ollman, Alienation, 78.

\textsuperscript{11}Karl Marx, "The Bourgeoisie and the Counter-Revolution" quoted in Bertell Ollman, Alienation, 274.

\textsuperscript{12}Schmitt, Introduction, 26.
means of existence. How we produce what is necessary to satisfy our needs determines who we are, and as we produce, we develop our powers, and we develop new needs. This in turn leads to development of social organization and new modes of production. As a result of a change in needs, an increased capacity of our species powers, and a transformation in our social organization, human nature develops and changes.

Marx is a "historical materialist" in that he believes our social existence determines our consciousness. As we create the world, we create ourselves. This dialectical movement between needs and powers is expressed in people's relationship to nature. We create ourselves in the process of transforming nature. "The growth of man's capabilities toward the ends inherent in them, in each individual as in history itself, is primarily the result of productive activity."\(^{13}\) It is productive activity that allows human powers to develop to their full capacity. Marx writes, "By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway."\(^{14}\)

According to Marx individuals are always determined by

\(^{13}\)Ollman, Alienation, 102-103.

their social function and their relationship with nature. For Marx, while there is an essential human nature, it is capable of developing and changing; it is not static. For Marx, even though our nature or essence is changing, we do have an essence—our powers developed through our work/labor. Work is the combined action of all human powers. "It is the need of all man's powers for the most direct means to their combined fulfillment, and it is common to people in all societies."\textsuperscript{15} It is also part of our essence to need each other, i.e. we are fundamentally social beings.

Marx, in a sense, gives a (loosely interpreted) constructed account of human nature, i.e. we create ourselves through our labor activity. As Gould writes, "Marx holds that individuals create this nature in their activity, and therefore it is neither fixed nor presupposed. This eventuates in a conception of a changing and developing essence."\textsuperscript{16} During this labor activity we create and develop our natural powers and transform and expand them through our action.

According to Marx what distinguishes us as humans is that we produce ourselves through our labor activity. We create ourselves by producing our means of subsistence.

\textsuperscript{15}Ollman, Alienation, 101.

According to Marx our human nature is formed through our work, specifically what we do to meet our needs in productive activity. Work is the active relatedness of humans to nature. He writes:

[Human beings] themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life. . . .

This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individual, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individual express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production.17

According to Marx, our mode of production determines who we are. As we produce things to satisfy our needs, we produce ourselves as well, and since different people produce things in different ways, they develop into different types of people. Through this process of production, or work, people develop their essential powers. Changes in the mode of production lead to changes in human's essential powers, and changes in human's essential powers lead to changes in the mode of production in an attempt to satisfy newly created needs.

Changes in the mode of production lead to changes in the social organization of society. According to Richard Schmitt,

What is distinctive about the conception of human nature held by Marx and Engels is . . . that human beings make themselves be who they are. . . . Central to human nature, then, is this ability of human beings to determine who they will be.\textsuperscript{18}

Through the process of work human beings not only produce their means of subsistence but they produce themselves. Unlike \textit{classical materialists}, who stress the impact of environment on essentially passive human subjects, for Marx human beings actively shape reality and are shaped by it. As they produce, they change reality, and they create new needs for themselves, which they then develop new means of production to satisfy, and in the process they create themselves as humans.

It is important to notice that human beings determine who they are in the context of their natural and economic environment. To say that human beings construct themselves by changing nature is to say that human beings appropriate nature. In Marx's sense "appropriation means to utilize constructively, to build by incorporating."\textsuperscript{19} People appropriate nature by making it in some way a part of themselves.\textsuperscript{20} We can now see how Marx begins to erase the

\textsuperscript{18}Schmitt, \textit{Introduction}, 8.

\textsuperscript{19}Ollman, \textit{Alienation}, 91.

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid.
subject object distinction. People are defined through material conditions and the appropriation of nature, while at the same time material conditions (nature) is defined through people.

What is distinctive about the productive activity of humans is that it is a conscious intentional activity. Human labor is premeditative, as Engels says, "premeditated, planned action directed toward definite ends known in advance." 21 Marx writes:

What distinguishes the most incompetent architect from the best of bees, is that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he constructs it in reality. The labor process ends in the creation of something which, when the process began, already existed in the workers imagination, already existed in an ideal form in natural objects, but he also realizes, in the nature that exists apart from himself, his own purpose to which he has to subordinate his own will. Nor is this subordination a momentary act. . .his purposive will, manifesting itself as attention, must be operative throughout the whole duration of the labor. 22

Marx is here distinguishing human labor activity from that of animals. The actions of animals are driven by instinct, or "natural powers," whereas the actions of humans are conscious and driven by conscious or species powers. "If natural powers can be viewed as establishing the framework


22Marx, *Capital*, 178.
in which life itself goes on, then man's species powers express the kind of life which man, as distinct from all other beings, carries on inside this framework." In The German Ideology Marx writes, "consciousness takes the place of instinct or...his instinct is a conscious one." Another thing that distinguishes human productive activity from that of animals is that, unlike animals, human beings are species beings, and because they are species beings they are free. In the manuscript "Alienated Labor," Marx clarifies what he means by species being:

Human beings are species beings, not only because in practice and in theory they adopt the species as their object...but also because they treat themselves as the actual, living species...The animal is immediately identical with its life-activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is its life-activity. Human beings make their life-activity itself the object of their will and of their consciousness.

As species beings, understood as beings who define their own nature, human beings are free. Human beings are not determined, they are free to create themselves. This ability to create themselves and define what it means to be a human being is, according to Marx what all human beings have in common.

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23 Ollman, Alienation, 85.
24 Marx, "German Ideology," in Marx-Engels Reader, 158.
25 Marx, The Economic and Philosophsic Manuscripts, in Marx-Engels Reader, 75-76.
26 Ibid., 75.
Marx and Engels in contrast to many philosophers, claim that human beings have in common only very general characteristics such as the potentiality for freedom—for defining what it means to be a human being—or the inclination to think before acting. . . . Human nature—that is, what differentiates us from animals—does not consist of specific traits but concerns our ability to change our traits and thus to define our human nature in new and different ways by changing our circumstances.  

Human beings, as species beings, think of themselves as a species; they are aware of their ability to define who they are. Human beings are self conscious; they are aware of themselves as individuals active in pursuing their own ends.  This awareness involves "mutual recognition, the act of seeing oneself in others, extends each individual's awareness to cover the whole human race; he realizes that the actions of others have aims similar to and even connected to his own." Thus human beings make all of nature, including each other, their objects.

Species being does not mean that the individual is subordinated to the species; rather it means that human beings see themselves as part of a species, and develop their species powers in mutual cooperation with one another. "Human beings do not determine the meaning of being human each for him— or herself. They do that collectively. Human

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27 Schmitt, Introduction, 12.
28 Ollman, Alienation, 84.
29 Ibid.
beings are fundamentally social beings."\textsuperscript{30}

It is important to note that Marx is against both collectivism and individualism. Of collectivism—and by this I mean the view that societies, states and nations are superpersons—Marx writes, "Just as society itself produces human beings as human beings, so is society produced by them. . . . What is to be avoided above all is the reestablishing of 'society' as an abstraction vis a vis the individual."\textsuperscript{31}

Marx is also against individualism:

The individual and isolated hunter and fisherman, with whom Smith and Ricardo begin, belongs among the unimaginable conceits of the 18th century. . . . The human being is in the most literal sense a \textit{zoon politikon}, not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society.\textsuperscript{32}

According to Marx human beings are social animals; they can create themselves as human beings only in a social context. In this sense Marx distinguishes himself from other Enlightenment philosophers such as Descartes who characterize human beings as rational agents independent of social, economic or political functioning. For Marx, since

\textsuperscript{30}Schmitt, \textit{Introduction}, 12.

\textsuperscript{31}Marx, \textit{The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts} in \textit{The Marx-Engels Reader}, 86. This establishing of society as a superperson is precisely what Freud begins to speculate about at the end of \textit{Civilization and Its Discontents} when he brings up the idea of the cultural superego.)

\textsuperscript{32}Karl Marx, \textit{The Grundrisse} in \textit{The Marx-Engels Reader}, 222-223.
human beings are species beings, they are essentially bound to nature, objects and each other. This idea of humans as *zoon politikon* also distinguishes Marx's idea of revolution: if people are inherently social and cooperative, then their work towards social intervention will be cooperative, rather than individualistic.

In his "Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach" Marx writes, "the human essence is no abstraction in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations."\(^{33}\) Similarly, in the *Grundrisse* Marx states that "Society expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations in which individuals stand."\(^{34}\) As Gould writes, "Marx is operating with an ontology of both real individuals and real relations."\(^{35}\) Gould goes on to argue that for Marx the "individual" and "relation" are not separable concepts. This is seen in the discussion of both labor and species being. If we recall from the previous discussion that for Marx individuals create themselves through their laboring activity, and if we remember that the "fundamental mode of this [labor] activity is social,"\(^{36}\) then we can see that as beings who define themselves concretely through their

\(^{33}\)Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 145.


\(^{36}\)Ibid., 34.
laboring activates human beings are social beings. Gould writes:

[T]he primary attributes that characterize the concretely existing individual and the primary activity of this individual involve his or her relations with other individuals. These relationships constitute these individuals as social individuals. Since sociality is the mode of being of these individuals, to take individuals simply as human and not as social is to abstract them from the concrete context that makes them the individuals they are.37

In order to understand humans as fundamentally social, we must remember that for Marx we cannot examine human nature independently of concrete social structures within which human nature develops. As has been argued, for Marx it is in the nature of individuals to act cooperatively as they work to appropriate nature and transform themselves as they develop their species powers.

For Marx human beings are not only inherently social, but they are also fundamentally rational. It is in this emphasis on rationality that ultimately Marx's conception of human nature falls within the Enlightenment tradition. Ollman argues that ultimately Marx is saying that the distinguishing characteristic of human beings is their ability to think rationally. The previous discussion established that what characterizes species power (in distinction to natural power) for Marx is the ability to engage in conscious, purposeful, planned activity. Ollman

37 Ibid., 34-35.
argues that this could be called rational activity. And since such activity is, according to Marx, the distinguishing characteristic of human nature, then it can be argued that Marx goes along with the Enlightenment tradition in saying that all human beings share a common essential defining characteristic, which is rationality. Ollman states it this way:

If life activity, in its most general sense, is life itself, the energy, movement, change of pace and rhythm devoted to satisfying natural needs, then species life activity stands out as its conscious, willed, purposive, flexible, concentrated and social facets which enable man to pursue the unique demands of his species. All the qualities Marx attributes to species life activity fit rather neatly into a category which Marx never used for this purpose. What have I said but that Marx view work as 'rational,' in the sense that man grasps the nature of what he wants to transform and is able to direct his movements accordingly?

Unlike Descartes and other Enlightenment rationalists Marx's conception of humans as rational is a contextual, materialist rationality. The capability of human beings to fully realize their rational capabilities is determined by their relationship with nature, i.e. determined by what stage human beings are at in their historical development characterized by their social relationships and mode of production. Unlike the more traditional Enlightenment conception of human nature, Marx sees human nature, not as something fixed, but as something that develops and changes.

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38 Ollman, Alienation, 114.
He puts great stock on human freedom, and does not--contrary to popular belief--think the individual should be subordinated to the state.

There are certain elements in Marx that have an almost postmodern ring, particularly the notion of the individual as an ensemble of social relations. In spite of the non-fixity of Marxian human nature, there are, however, some constants. Humans are fundamentally rational. Moreover, humans, at least all those belonging to a given class, are fundamentally the same. Each of these assumptions are, from a postmodern feminist perspective, problematic. Not only are they problematic in their own right, but they will suggest a concept of social transformation--the classical Marxian revolution--which, as I will later discuss, is also highly problematic.

The idea that we are constructed within power configurations is a notion Marx shares with postmodernism. Marx would say that this laboring activity is our essence, shared by all people, but, our nature as laborers is affected by the power configurations of our society. However, for Marx, these power configurations are first and foremost economic power structures, as opposed to the power structure of gender or race, for example.

It is this emphasis on economic power structures that allows Marx to privilege labor over any other form of human
activity.\textsuperscript{39} His emphasis on labor as the constitutive human activity is what leads him to determine that identity within each class is uniform. While he does in some places indicate that heredity plays a role in identity,\textsuperscript{40} his general theory holds that it is the conditions of class that determine identity.

A further, implicit, assumption made by Marx is that all members of a class (whether, for example, male or female, Jew or Christian, Black or White) experience the same oppression. "By exaggerating the determining role of economic factors,"\textsuperscript{41} Marx can argue that all members of a class will for the most part develop similar powers and have similar needs. Marx assumes that economic factors will eclipse differences of gender and race, "Even the natural diversity of species, as, for example, the differences of

\textsuperscript{39}One of the major discussions in socialist feminist writings on Marx is that he privileges the activity of production over that of reproduction and that his analysis concentrates on the oppression of workers under capitalism and for the most part ignores an explicit analysis of women under the oppression of patriarchy. See for example Heidi Hartman, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," in Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism, ed., Lydia Sargent (Boston: South End Press, 1981) 1-41; Iris Young, "Socialist Feminism and the Limits of Dual Systems Theory" in Throwing Like A Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 21-35.

\textsuperscript{40}See Ollman, Alienation, 126.

\textsuperscript{41}Ibid.
race, etc. . . . are and must be checked historically.\textsuperscript{42}

Marx fails to recognize power differentials \textit{within} classes, examining only those between classes. It is just such an analysis that postmodern theory demands. The Marxist concept of political intervention, therefore, involves a wide-scale mass cooperative effort of one class to overthrow another. But there are not simply unified classes but differential power distributions among classes. Postmodern theory calls for an examination of the interaction of multiple sites of oppression, not just the oppression of one class by another. According to Marx there is a single fundamental division to consider in political theory--the division between the proletariat and bourgeois. Postmodern theory permits us to consider this fissure, but does not emphasize it. There are many important relationships to examine and possible sites of oppression. It follows, as we shall see, that it is a mistake, conceptually and politically, to overemphasize the importance of one large, unified revolution in effecting major social change.

\textbf{Marx and Engels on Private Property and Gender}

For Marx all human development takes place within the context of specific modes of production, which shape both

individual consciousness and social relationships. Consequently we must examine what happens to human nature with the introduction of private property. According to Marx the introduction of private property ultimately alienates human beings from their species powers, and thus from the essence of their human nature. In this section I will discuss the introduction of private property and what effect this has on a fundamental social relationship: that between women and men. I will first briefly examine Marx's original account of private property and gender as stated in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, and in *The German Ideology*. I will then look at how this position is developed by Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. In all of these works Marx and Engels argue that the determining factor in history is the mode of production and the property relations that define it. The structure of society, including the family, depends on how people produce their means of existence through developments in the mode of production.

In *The German Ideology* Marx gives his first systematic statement of historical materialism. As part of this metanarrative he examines the historical development of, among other things, the family. One of Marx's main concerns in this work is to examine the division of labor. It is in developing this concept that he introduces his discussion of the family. In this work Marx gives a
succinct account of the role of the family in terms of establishing private property and the division of labor. Marx's basic thesis here is that division of labor is the basis of private property. Division of labor was initially, "nothing but the division of labor in the sexual act, then that division of labor which develops spontaneously or 'naturally' by virtue of natural pre-disposition (e.g., physical strength), needs, accidents, etc., etc." We observe that Marx bases his analysis on the assumption that there is a "natural" division of labor. This is a profound and unexamined assumption about human nature—that men and women are naturally different and that this difference is partially responsible for the division of labor. He offers no argument for this crucial point, but like Engels will do in The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, simply states it as a fact. This unproven fact then becomes the basis for his analysis of the origination of private property and the division of labor, two crucial aspects to his entire philosophy.

This analysis also shows Marx's inattentiveness to gender roles and the development of patriarchy. For a philosopher whose analysis of the origination of capitalism is voluminous, he devotes very little space to the "naturally" occurring division of labor based on the

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differences in the two sexes. He simply says it is based on "natural predispositions" and substantiates his argument with "etc. etc.". One can hardly imagine Marx casually putting forth the claim that humans have a "natural predisposition" toward class distinctions and substantiating this claim with "etc. etc.". Marx goes on to say that the division of labor, which is what alienates humans from their own nature, is based on these "natural predispositions."

Marx writes:

[T]he division of labor. . . . is based on the natural division of labor in the family and the separation of society into individual families opposed to one another, is given simultaneously the distribution, and indeed the unequal distribution. . . . of labor and its products, hence property: the nucleus, the first form, of which lies in the family, where the wife and children are the slaves of the husband. This latent slavery in the family. . . . is the first property. 44

Marx continues his analysis stating that, "division of labor and private property are, moreover, identical expressions: in the one the same thing is affirmed with reference to activity as is affirmed in the other with reference to the product of the activity." 45 According to Marx private property and the division of labor are both the cause and the result of alienation. Marx also states that the natural division of labor is the cause of private property and the division of labor. The result of this is

44 Ibid., 205.
the degradation of women. At the nexus of this analysis is the unexamined assumption that there was an original and natural division of labor.

There are positive aspects to Marx's account which are worth noting. Marx does recognize that women are indeed oppressed (unlike the vast majority of the philosophers of his day). Furthermore, according to Marx the oppression of women is not an eternal condition, but rather one that can and will be changed. This is one of the liberating aspects of historical materialism, and one reason Marx tells the metanarrative the way he does in *The German Ideology* and in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Since Marx has linked "the slavery" of women to the origination of private property, he argues that with the abolition of private property we will also see the abolition of the women's degradation. According to this Marxian metanarrative the division of labor and private property lead to both alienation (on which Marx focuses most extensively and explicitly) and the degradation of women (on which Marx focuses rarely and cryptically). Thus he can argue that by abolishing both (as would happen in communism) we end both alienation and the degradation of women.

While for the most part Marx ignores women in his philosophy, he does make the important claim that one can judge the level of development of culture by the "humanity" of the woman-man relationship. In the third of *The Economic*
and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, "Private Property and Labor," Marx makes one of his rare comments about women:

In the relationship with woman, as the prey and the handmaid of communal lust, is expressed the infinite degradation in which man exists for himself; for the secret of this relationship finds its unequivocal, incontestable, open and revealed expression in the relation of man to woman and in the way in which the direct and natural species relationship is conceived. The immediate, natural and necessary relation of human being to human being is also the relation of man to woman. . . . From this relationship man's whole level of development can be assessed. It follows from the character of this relationship how far man has become, and has understood himself as, a species-being, a human being. The relation of man to woman is the most natural relation of human being to human being. It indicates, therefore, how far man's natural behavior has become human, and how far his human essence has become a natural essence for him, how far his human nature has become nature for him. It also shows how far man's needs have become human needs, and consequently how far the other person, as a person, has become one of his needs, and to what extent he is an individual existence at the same time a social being.\textsuperscript{46}

The vast majority of Marx's philosophy focuses on economic factors and the political division between the proletariat and bourgeois, yet here Marx makes a profound statement about the relationship between women and men. What I have briefly introduced in this section and what I will consider more thoroughly in the next is to what extent is Marx and Engels' overall argument distorted in order to link the introduction of private property to the relationship of women and men? If we put together what they

\textsuperscript{46}Marx, The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 in Marx's Concept of Man, 126-127.
wrote in *The German Ideology* and what Marx wrote in "Private Property and Labor," it becomes apparent that it is crucial for Marx and Engels to establish that the degradation of women is linked to the origination of private property, so that they can show that by abolishing private property, we will move towards becoming species beings and human beings.

This Marxian metanarrative undergoes a major shift when Engels discovers the anthropological work of Lewis Henry Morgan, who published *Ancient Society* in 1877. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* is based on Morgan's *Ancient Society*. About Morgan Engels wrote in 1884, "in his own way...[he] discovered afresh in America the materialistic conception of history discovered by Marx 40 years ago." The central idea in Morgan's *Ancient Society* is, according to Eleanor Leacock,

> that human history can be defined in terms of successive stages... He stated that it was the 'successive arts of subsistence which arose at long intervals' which were responsible for the development of the three major stages. He proposed parallel sequences in the history of social, economic and political institutions. By implication, they were closely related to the economic sequence.\(^{47}\)

Morgan's work offered concrete data to support Marx and Engels' metanarrative of historical materialism first outlined in *The German Ideology*. Morgan's analysis offered anthropological evidence of the development of private

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property and how this effected family structures and other social and political interactions.

The evidence provided by Morgan was extremely important to Engels and is the reason for the difference between the account of the origination of private property given in *The German Ideology* and that given later by Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Prior to Morgan, Marx and Engels assumed that humanity had always been divided into classes. (Hence the opening lines of the *Communist Manifesto*: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."48) So in the beginning Marx and Engels posit the division of labor as coterminous with private property, and since they see the gender division as "natural," they see woman as the first form of property. Morgan provided anthropological evidence indicating that early humanity was in fact communistic. With this data the metanarrative first told in *The German Ideology* can now take on a more Hegelian dialectical form. As Engels develops the metanarrative in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* history moves from primitive communism (thesis) to class society (antithesis) to ultimate communism (synthesis).

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* Engels argues, in accordance with basic Marxian

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doctrine, that historical development can be traced in terms of changes in the mode of production. All structures in society, including the family, and all human relationships, including relationships of class and gender, depend on how people produce their means of existence through developments in the mode of production. Human progress is measured in terms of changes in this production.

Drawing on data from Morgan, Engels constructs a metanarrative to establish that the origin of the family, like the origin of everything else, is economic. He postulates that there was a time when land and property were owned communally, inheritance was through the mother, women were strong and powerful leaders, and when women's work was valued as much as men's work. According to Engels, the monogamous family as we know it came into existence with private property, which brought about the "world historical defeat of the female sex."49

Engels begins by going through a narrative of the development of the family from the most primitive, which is group marriage, to the contemporary form of monogamy. The overall trend in the development of the family is that the acceptable sphere of sexual relationships (above all for women) is increasingly narrowed. The oldest form of family

49We observe that in this account private property is no longer conterminous with the sexual division of labor, nor, as seems to be the case for Marx and Engels earlier, is the monogamous family taken to be "natural."
is group marriage--characterized by promiscuous sexual intercourse and an absence of prohibitions and restrictions on sexual partners. The next form of family is the consanguine family. In this arrangement marriage groups are separated according to generation. The only exclusion in terms of sexual relationships is that between parents and children. The next stage is the punaluan family in which brothers and sisters cannot mate. After this comes the pairing family in which one man and one woman mate; however, men are allowed both polygamy and occasional infidelity. Growing out of the pairing family is the monogamous family, the first form of family to be non-communistic, patrilineal, and patriarchal. All forms of family before monogamy are, according to Engels, communistic. And in the communistic society production was centered around the household. As long as women control the mode of production, which during this time was centered in the household, women will remain in power. Thus Engels maintains that before monogamy society was communistic, matrilineal, and matriarchal.

Engels wants to show that the origin of the family is economic and that changes in the mode of production lead to changes in the organization of society. Consequently he must establish an economic basis for matriarchy, which can then be replaced with patriarchy. If he can show that patriarchy is based on the establishment of private property, then he can show that if we eliminate private
property we will also eliminate patriarchy. In order to understand the steps Engels takes in his argument, I will briefly discuss how he thinks private property comes about and what effect this has on the power of women.

In describing the communistic household Engels' writes:

Communistic housekeeping...means the supremacy of women in the house; just as the exclusive recognition of the female parent, owing to the impossibility of recognizing the male parent with certainty, means that the women—the mothers—are held in high respect. One of the most absurd notions taken over from the 18th century enlightenment is that in the beginning of society woman was the slave to man.\textsuperscript{50} Among all savages and all barbarians...the position of woman is not only free, but honorable.\textsuperscript{51}

The last stage of marriage groupings to be communistic (before the non-communistic monogamous family) is the pairing family. Engels emphasizes that in the pairing arrangement, as in all communistic households, women were supreme in the house, they were held in high respect, they were free and honorable, and were the "great power among the clans, as everywhere else. They did not hesitate, when occasion required, 'to knock off the horns,' as it was technically called, from the head of a chief, and send him

\textsuperscript{50}This was Marx and Engels earlier view as stated in The German Ideology and The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844.

back to the ranks of the warriors.\textsuperscript{52} While in the pairing family women were powerful, free, and honorable, Engels also states that "women had now become scarce and highly sought after. Hence it is with the pairing marriage that there begins the capture and purchase of women."\textsuperscript{53}

The progression from the pairing family to the monogamous family takes place, according to Engels, with the advent of private property. Engels argues that the domestication of animals, as well as metal working, weaving, and agriculture were the changes in the mode of production that led to this change in the structure of society. With the introduction of these new technologies labor power began to produce surplus over and above the subsistence. This surplus led to the accumulation of wealth. In addition to this, the center of production moved outside the household.

We observe that Engels, like Marx in The German Ideology, assumes that there is a natural division of labor. Based on this assumption, he postulates that women worked within the household while men were responsible for activities outside the household—such as gathering food and domestication animals. In the communistic family production was centered around the household, so women were in charge and society was matriarchal. Once the mode of production


\textsuperscript{53}Engels, Origins, 112.
changed to include agriculture and the domestication of animals, the center of production moved to outside the household, where men were in charge. Thus society moves from matriarchy to patriarchy.

According to the division of labor within the family at that time, it was the man's part to obtain food and the instruments of labor necessary for the purpose. He therefore also owned the instruments of labor, and in the event of husband and wife separating, he took them with him, just as she retained her household goods. Therefore, according to the social custom of the time, the man was also the owner of the new source of subsistence, the cattle, and later of the new instruments of labor, the slaves. 54

Here Engels sets up an explanation as to how and why men came to own property and rule over women. He bases this on an original sexual division of labor.

In communistic societies inheritance was passed down through the mother. Yet as men's wealth increased (because they were the ones who owned the private property, namely cattle, which is now producing surplus), their position in the family became more important than that of the women's. Men wanted to overthrow the power of women and ensure that their property would be inherited by their children. Yet, according Engels, communistic societies were matrilineal; decent was determined through the mother--called "mother right"--thus men had to first overthrow "mother right." 55

54Ibid., 119.

Thus on the one hand, in proportion as wealth increased it made the man's power in the family more important than the woman's, and on the other hand created an impulse to exploit this strengthened position in order to overthrow, in favor of his children, the traditional order of inheritance. This however, was impossible so long as descent was reckoned according to mother right. Mother right, therefore, had to be overthrown, and overthrown it was.  

How did this revolutionary shift in power take place? Engels' answer to this is worth quoting in full.

This [the overthrow of mother right] was by no means so difficult as it looks to us today. for this revolution--one of the most decisive ever experienced by humanity--could take place without disturbing a single one of the living members of the [clans]. All could remain as they were. A simple decree sufficed that in the future the offspring of the male members should remain within the [clans], but that of the female should be excluded by being transferred to the [clans] of their father. The reckoning of descent in the female line and the matriarchal law of inheritance were thereby overthrown, and the male line of descent and the paternal law of inheritance were substituted for them.

It was this "simple decree" that brought about "the world historical defeat of the female sex." Matriarchy was replaced by patriarchy, matrilineality by patrilineality, and communism by private property. And women were "degraded and reduced to servitude." It was this overthrow of mother right which marked the transition from the pairing family, which was communistic, to the monogamous family, which is not. According to Engels, monogamous marriage is not based

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56 Engels, Origin, 119-120.

57 Ibid., 120. Emphasis my own.
on love but on property; it is a way for a man with property to make sure he has someone to pass it on to. The monogamous family is based on the supremacy of the male. Men give their property to their male children. According to Engels, the origin of monogamy is economic:

It was the first form of the family to be based not on natural but on economic conditions—on the victory of private property over primitive, natural communal property. . . .the sole exclusive aims of monogamous marriage were to make the man supreme in the family and to propagate, as the future heirs to his wealth, children indisputably his own. . . .monogamous marriage comes on the scene as the subjugation of the one sex by the other; it announces a struggle between the sexes unknown throughout prehistoric period.58

Not only is the subjection of women based entirely on economic conditions, but this subjection is the prototype for all class oppression. He continues:

And today I can add: the first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male.59

Since Engels equates the subjugation of women to the economic circumstances of private property, he argues that the communist revolution will ameliorate the oppression of woman. He writes, "The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife, and modern society is a mass composed of these individual

58 Ibid., 128.
59 Ibid., 129.
families as its molecules."\(^{60}\) In order to liberate women, Engels argues, it is necessary to bring them back into the public realm. This requires that the monogamous family as an economic unit be abolished. Monogamy arose from the concentration of wealth in the hands of men. Engels proposes to transfer the wealth from individual men to society as a whole. Then men do not have to worry about their children inheriting their private property. This transfer of wealth calls for a social revolution. Once the means of production is owned in common, the single family ceases to be the economic unit of society.

There are some logical problems with Engels' narrative which bear consideration.\(^{61}\) In his discussion of the pairing family Engels' description of the social arrangements makes many assumptions only explained by the patriarchal context from which he theorizes.

Engels states that in the pairing marriage there is the "capture and purchase of women." This statement raises two questions. If women were strong and powerful and could "knock off the horns" of a chief, how could they so easily be captured? Doesn't the "capture and purchase of women" negate Engels statement that at this stage "the position of

\(^{60}\)Ibid., 137.

women is not only free, but honorable"?62 Free, honorable, and powerful people do not get captured and purchased.63 The implications of this are important. On the one hand Engels needs to claim that women in communistic societal relations are free and honorable so that he can blame their downfall on private property and the consequent mode of production and social organization. On the other hand his own argument is so entrenched in a patriarchal context that he is not able to support his basic claim (that women were powerful before the advent of private property and it was changes in the mode of production which led to their defeat, not independent social changes).

Engels also makes the assumption that it is men and not women who want sex.64 He states, "In this stage [the pairing

62Rosemarie Tong raises a similar question, "did [it] not strike Engels as odd that a powerful matriarch would let herself be forcibly seized as a wife by a man whose 'horns' she could have 'knocked off'?" Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 246, nt 25.

63In patriarchal slave societies, ancient Greece, for example, men are taken as slaves, "free and honorable" men, who have been defeated in battle. So "free and honorable" people do sometimes get captured and purchased. The difference between the capture and purchase of male slaves in patriarchal slave societies, and the capture and purchase of female wives in the matriarchal pairing family, is that the former have first been defeated in battle, whereas the later, according to Engels' narrative, remain free, honorable, and powerful, yet are still captured and purchased.

64Gerda Lerner writes: "Engels' speculations on the nature of female sexuality have been criticized as reflecting his own sexist Victorian values in their unexamined assumption that nineteenth-century standards of
family], one man lives with one woman, but the relationship is such that polygamy and occasional infidelity remain the right of the men, even though for economic reasons polygamy is rare, while from the woman strictest fidelity is generally demanded throughout the time she lives with the man and adultery on her part is cruelly punished.\(^{65}\) Cruelly punished by whom? Engels claims that women are the head of the household, they are free and honorable, they can knock the horns off a chief, and yet they are cruelly punished. Engels continues: "The marriage tie can, however, be easily dissolved by either partner; after separation, the children still belong as before to the mother alone."\(^{66}\) On the one hand women are not allowed sexual freedom and are cruelly punished, and on the other hand they are automatically allowed to keep their children. This does not make sense except as support for Engels' argument. Again, it is essential for Engels' overall argument to claim that before private property societies were matrilineal and matriarchal so that he can show

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female prudery could explain the actions and attitudes of women at the dawn of civilization." Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 22. Sigmund Freud makes a similar assumption in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), especially in Chapter Four where he contends that in civilization men want sexual relations with women and women want to be with their children. (This is stated explicitly on page 56.)

\(^{65}\)Engels, *Origin*, 111.

\(^{66}\)Ibid.
patriarchy stems from private property. But the evidence he is giving for matrilineal and matriarchal societies does not support his claim that they actually existed.\textsuperscript{67} On the one hand he claims matriarchy and matriliniality and on the other he keeps giving examples that show women were controlled by men. If Engels cannot prove matriarchy, however, then he cannot prove that private property is the cause of patriarchy.

Engels' explanation of the "world historical defeat of the female sex" is based on an assumption of a "natural division of labor" and "social custom". Throughout this work Engels unquestionably assumes a basic division of labor in which women work inside the house, producing most of the material goods, while men hunt.

The man fights in the wars, goes hunting and fishing, procuresthe raw materials of food and the tools necessary for doing so. The woman looks after the house and the preparation of food and clothing, cooks, weaves, sews. They are each master in their own sphere: the man in the forest, the woman in the house.\textsuperscript{68}


\textsuperscript{68}Engels, \textit{Origin}, 218.
It is this arrangement that, "according to the social custom of the time" leads to men owning "the new source of subsistence, the cattle." What social custom? How can man's ownership of private property, which led to the world historical defeat of the female sex, be explained simply as a social custom of the time? Doesn't a statement of such magnitude require a better argument, or at least an argument? Does the fact that Engels doesn't feel the need to argue this point more carefully indicate that he and Marx do not place too much value on the introduction of patriarchy per se and the defeat of woman? Could it be that they gloss over this because they see the introduction of private property as the main problem?

Engels states that "a simple decree" sufficed to overthrow mother right. He further states that not a single member of the clan was disturbed by this revolution and that all could remain as they were. But this is incorrect, since obviously the daughters do not remain as they were. They are now compelled to leave the maternal clan. Moreover, he is talking about an overwhelming change in the power structure of society, calling it one of the most decisive revolutions in human history, yet according to Engels this does not have a major effect on human nature. This seems to contradict Marx's own argument about human powers needing to be free to develop and developing within the context of a specific society. The fact that women are now going to be
"slaves of lust" does not seem to strike Engels as a major infringement on their basic human freedom. One can hardly imagine Marx and Engels describing the proletariat overthrowing the bourgeois, and saying it "could take place without disturbing a single one of the living members of society," or that it could take place by "a simple decree". The fact that Engels can so casually dismiss the overthrow of matriarchy and the establishment of patriarchy indicates the lack of importance he ultimately places on the equality of women. By Engels own account the women at this time were respected and powerful, they "could knock the horns off" someone, so why would their overthrow be so easily accomplished? The consequences were, after all, immense:

The overthrow of mother right was the world historical defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children. This degraded position of the woman....has gradually been palliated and glossed over, and sometimes clothed in a milder form; in no sense has it been abolished.  

This passage, besides announcing the decisive decline of the power of women, makes another profound assumption. "the woman was degraded...a mere instrument for the production of children". Engels is obviously placing no value on this form of production. He is all too causally dismissing the value of women's reproductive function. Furthermore, while Engels carefully examines changes in the mode of production

69 Ibid., 120-121.
throughout *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* he ignores the history of reproduction. This seems like a case, similar to what we will see with Freud, where the patriarchal context within which Engels and Marx are theorizing clouds their rationality. For thinkers who place so much emphasis on material circumstances and surplus, how could they not even examine the value of women's reproductive functioning?  

In addition to these logical problems with Engels narrative, recent anthropological evidence indicates that factually it is incorrect as well. According to Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Patriarchy*, the ethnographic data on which Engels' based his analysis has been largely discredited.  

According to Lerner, "the assumption that there is one formula and one pattern for the sexual division of labor is erroneous. The particular work done by men and women has differed greatly in different cultures, largely depending on the ecological situation in which the people find themselves." This challenges Engels' argument that men are the original possessors of private property (cattle)  

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70 Many socialist feminists think that one way to incorporate Marxism and feminism is to examine the value of reproduction as well as that of production.

71 Lerner, *Creation of Patriarchy*, 22. See pages 22-24 for a discussion of Engels. For a more detailed account of the archeological, ethnographic, and anthropological data both supporting and disproving Engels' account see Eleanor Burke Leacock's *Introduction to Origin*.

72 Lerner, *Creation of Patriarchy*, 22.
because they work outside the household, an assumption central to his entire argument. While Engels' analysis greatly simplifies the division of labor between women and men and his conclusions are not supported by Lerner's data, she does find his analysis a useful one. She states that "his great merit was to point up the impact of societal and cultural forces in structuring and defining sexual relations." In other words, by connecting the world historical defeat of the female sex to economic conditions, he opens up an analysis of gender to social interpretation and disrupts the idea that biology is destiny, or that because women have children they are destined to be inferior. This is an extremely important contribution and should not be overlooked.

My fundamental criticism of Engels' account is that this is just a story, not a careful, rigorous analysis. It is a metanarrative, which serves as an important orienting devise for a political project. This is not an account without worth. Engels shows that the subjection of women is a socially constructed situation and one that can change. However, this account is deeply flawed and the consequences have been enormous. Engels subordinates women's struggle to overcome their oppression to the class struggle to overcome private property. Engels' metanarrative obviates the need to explore the complex interactions of class and

\[73\text{Ibid., 23.}\]
sex, because, according to his analysis, the opposition between the sexes is based solely on economic conditions and in a state of communism will be erased.

Engels constructs his metanarrative in such a way as to make the oppression of women coextensive and commensurate with the advent of private property. A serious flaw in the work of Marx and Engels, however, is that their work largely ignores the specific aspect of women's oppression and focuses almost exclusively on class oppression and the need to abolish private property. There is no discussion on the need to abolish patriarchy. This is why understanding the flaws in this argument are so crucial to the overall focus of this work, which is an examination of ways to disrupt patriarchy. If, as many Marxists argue, patriarchy is based on the establishment of private property, then one would logically argue that social intervention aimed at challenging patriarchy would logically begin with the overthrow of private property. I would argue that patriarchy is not dependent on private property and thus I claim that by getting rid of private property we will not necessarily get rid of patriarchy.74

The issue to consider is where does one locate the source of oppression and thus where does one locate efforts

74There is an ongoing debate among some feminist theorists about the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy. The nuances of this debate are beyond the scope of this work.
to bring about changes in society. Marx and Engels argue that the major source of oppression is class oppression, based on unequal relationships of property (the owners of the mode of production verses those who lose their freedom and themselves because they do not own the means of production). I am not here arguing that this is not a major source of oppression, but rather I am arguing that it is not the source of oppression. Patriarchy is a source of oppression, connected in many ways but not identical to capitalism. I therefore disagree with Engels' conclusion that the "world historical defeat of the female sex" is based solely on economics.

It is clear from this examination of Engels that he does not give careful enough consideration to the origination and role of patriarchy. His analysis of the overthrow of matriarchy and matriliniality is deeply flawed. This does not mean we dismiss Marxian economic theory because it lacks a cohesive theory of patriarchy. It means Marx and Engels and their definition of human nature and their concept of revolution cannot stand alone; it must be read along with those of other thinkers such as Freud, Foucault, Flax, and Butler.

**Marx's Concept of Revolution**

As we can see, the conception of human nature implicit in Marx's writings of 1844 is that human beings are free and continually developing beings whose spirit is embodied in
their labor activity. Human beings express their nature in their labor, for labor is the way humans develop their species powers by transforming nature. Through labor human beings are able to appropriate nature; they make nature their object. Human beings are unique in that they make all of nature, including each other their object. Human labor is an essential expression of human nature because, according to Marx, human beings create themselves as they transform nature. But, Marx argues, under capitalism conditions of alienated labor separates us from our "true" nature. This analysis would lead to the conclusion that in order to free human nature, it is necessary to abolish the capitalist system, a system in which capitalists owns the means of production and workers are forced to work for them. In fact, the abolition of capitalism is seen to be both necessary and sufficient for human emancipation. Marx writes towards the end of the "Alienated Labor" manuscript:

> From the relation of alienated labor to private property it also follows that the emancipation of society from private property, from servitude, takes the political form of the emancipation of the workers; not in the sense that only the latter's emancipation is involved, but because this emancipation includes the emancipation of humanity as a whole. For all human servitude is involved in the relation of the worker to production, and all the types of servitude are only modifications or consequences of this relation.\(^{75}\)

This is an important and revealing passage. Here Marx

\(^{75}\)Marx, The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 in Marx's Concept of Man, 107.
is saying that emancipation of workers will lead to the emancipation of society as a whole because, as he says, "all human servitude is involved in the relation of the worker to production, and all types of servitude are only modifications or consequences of this relation." Here Marx is obviously giving priority to the emancipation of the workers, and saying that if workers are emancipated, then all other forms of emancipation will follow. One can assume here he would mean that the emancipation of women would follow the emancipation of workers. In other words he is saying that if we get rid of the structural domination of capitalism, then the structural domination of patriarchy will follow.

This is a point where I and most other feminist scholars disagree with Marx. It may be true that Marx's analysis of capitalism, and the project of overthrowing this system, are essential aspects of any genuine theory of liberation, but these elements do not in themselves comprise a complete theory of liberation.

Marx's concept of human nature leads to his concept of political intervention. He thinks that the way to bring about fundamental change is to engage in a large scale, socio-political revolution, in which the workers unite to overthrow the capitalists and thus gain control of the means of production, "The first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of
ruling class." Marx thinks that we are species beings, that we are essentially cooperative. With this conception of human nature, he can conceive of workers uniting and forming a massive, united group which can act as a unified force to overthrow capitalism.

Two elements need to be interrogated here, Marx's concept of agency, and his concept of revolution. These two areas are fundamentally connected, so that reconceiving agency requires reconceiving our concept of emancipatory strategies of political intervention. I would argue that it is in Marx's limited conception of agency, limited to agency primarily constructed within economic power configurations, that has made Marxists overlook the forms of political intervention waged by some feminists. Indeed as David Schweickart has observed, "Marxism, the philosophy of revolution, has missed what is perhaps the greatest revolution of our century," (Schweickart, 350) namely the revolution against patriarchy. Marxism has missed this revolution because of its concept of agency. Marx believed, as expressed in the passage quoted above, if we eliminate class domination and capitalism, all other forms of oppression will likewise disappear. Marx can say this, because he is not looking at the differential power

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76 Marx and Engels Communist Manifesto, 93.

configurations within each class. He sees class consciousness as a unified concept, because, in his view, all people of the same class are dealing with the same basic form of oppression.

Among the differential power configurations Marx's analysis eclipses are the gender relations within classes. Women and men are not equal within the working class. Marx overlooks the oppressive force of patriarchy, independent from capitalism, which leads to the oppression of women qua women. This is not to say that Marxism has been hostile to feminism. Most Marxists accept the basic legitimacy of the feminist project. There is a recognition that women have been oppressed and that they have the right to challenge this oppression. The difficulty arises in conceiving how the struggle of women relates to class struggle. If women's struggle is subsumed under the rubric of class struggle, then it can be argued that a revolution which leads to class liberation will automatically lead to women's liberation as well. On the other hand if women's struggle is thought of independently of class struggle, it is difficult for many Marxists to conceive of women making a revolution—in the Marxist sense of this term (armed uprising, large scale general strike, etc.)—as women. If, however, we reconceive of agency, and what we mean by the category of women (something I will develop in subsequent chapters), then, as we shall see, it is possible to reconceive "revolution" as a
network of alternative strategies of political intervention, not all of which are modeled on the political revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (or the Russian and Chinese revolutions of the twentieth century).

Part of reconceiving political intervention involves reconceiving power. What I will argue in the following chapters is that what postmodern feminism brings to the discussion of emancipatory politics is both a reconception of agency (both one that explicitly thematizes gender and one that looks at how our concept of human nature is constructed within various matrices of power, one of which is patriarchy) and, a more nuanced understanding of power. Once we understand how agents are constructed within various power configurations, then our idea of political intervention can change. "Seizing power" is no longer the only model of emancipatory political practice. If we think of power in the postmodern terms of Foucault, Flax, and Butler, not as something to be seized, but rather as something in which we already are embedded, something within which our identity is constructed, then rather than seizure, the project becomes one of reconfiguration, redeployment, and renegotiation. This is a contribution that postmodern feminist theory makes to the discussion of emancipatory politics.

There is also the problem of Marx's concept of class. It can be argued that this idea, in uniting a large group of
people under the rubric of "class," marginalizes the differences inherent in this group of people. Revolution in the Marxian sense relies on a universalizing and thus totalizing concept of human nature, whereas postmodern feminist theory, as we shall see, wants to focus on the differences that are eclipsed in such a concept of human nature. Schweickart has noted that,

[I]t quite difficult for most Marxists (particularly male Marxists) to grant equal weight to the two struggles [feminists challenging patriarchy and Marxists challenging capitalism] and hence to regard with sufficient seriousness the theoretical research and practical actions of feminists that have no obvious or immediate bearing on class. It is difficult to grant equal weight because it is difficult to see how the feminist agenda contributes to the Revolution (capital R).\(^7\)

It is only hard to see how feminist contribute to the Revolution, if we remain in the context that has been laid out by Marx, namely that the major force of human oppression is capitalism, that the fundamental agent of change is a united working class, and that the model of revolution is an abrupt seizure of political power. According to Marx's conception of the person, labor is the fundamental constituent of human subjectivity and humans are fundamentally rational as well as social. The postmodern feminist critique of this line of thought interrogates these three major premises of Marx's conception of human nature: What if labor is not the only or most central constituent of

\(^7\)Ibid., 352.
human nature? What if we are not fundamentally rational? What if we are as asocial as we are social— or rather neither by nature? What if we are not all (in the same class) fundamentally the same? By challenging and disrupting Marx's concept of agency, postmodern feminist theory opens up new avenues of political intervention and broadens possibilities for resistance to various systems of structural domination such as patriarchy and capitalism.

In the following chapters I will argue that the new notion of radical transformation needed by Marxism is provided by a postmodern feminist conception of self and political intervention. I will argue that "performativity" is just such a new practice, one that will use some of the insights of Marxism and provide a plausible notion of effective emancipatory political practice.

Marxism is an important revolutionary theory dealing with economic oppression, but we need other theories of political intervention to deal with issues such as gender. What postmodernism allows is a plurality of intervention strategies. Unlike Marxism, which insists that all current forms of oppression are linked to capitalism, postmodernism allows for, and indeed demands, multiple sites of intervention. This is because postmodernism does not see power as univocal. In this way postmodernism has a place for Marxism, since postmodernism is a "pluralistic philosophy of liberation". It is therefore incorrect to see
postmodernism as antithetical to Marxism, as many theorists do; rather postmodernism allows for the practice of various strategies of intervention, among them Marxist revolutionary strategies. But it is a modified, because non-hegemonic Marxism, that postmodernism allows for.
Chapter Two

Freud

Freud's theory of the unconscious and his attention to the role of the body and of desire in forming the self has played an important role in disrupting the classical modern philosophical idea associated with Descartes that the transcendental subject is a unified rational agent with unmediated self-knowledge. In this chapter I will give a summary and critical analysis of three aspects of Freud's work that are particularly relevant to my project: his structural model of the mind, his theory of the construction of gender identity, and his metanarrative of civilization, attending to any possibility of social intervention that these concepts reveal.

I will pay particular attention to the way in which gender is developed in these various parts of Freud's theory. Freud's anxiety about female sexuality extends throughout his work. While his theories challenge many previously held notions of rationality and sexuality, I will argue that his own ambivalence about female sexuality pervades and at times distorts his analysis. He remains constrained within the patriarchal ideology that presumes men to be superior to women biologically and culturally.
Freud's Structural Model of the Mind

Freud's concept of the self both disrupts and reinforces Enlightenment concepts of subjectivity. His theory challenges the Enlightenment concept that the self is a unified rational agent capable of full self-awareness; he develops a model of the mind that is radically decentered. Rather than of a unified rational agent, Freud's model is one of a divided mind that is constantly in conflict with itself. Moreover, this mind is primarily unconscious and permeated by irrationality.

Freud's work is, however, permeated by the Enlightenment conception of science. He insists on positivist notions of science, and he wants psychoanalysis to be accepted as such a science.1 The issue of the scientific status of Freud's thought is a major one in the literature, but from a postmodern feminist point of view, this is not the important issue. First of all postmodernism is highly suspicious of "scientific" rationality, especially in the social sciences ("sciences of man"). Secondly, whether or not Freud's theory is scientifically well-grounded--meaning that there have been controlled

1But while the Enlightenment concept of science privileges the disengaged rational observer, Jane Flax makes the provocative argument that Freud's own, "[a]nxieties about gender deeply affect his supposedly gender-neutral concepts of knowledge and the nature of psychoanalytic practice." Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West (Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1990), 67.
experiments verifying his basic claims—the fact remains that Freud's model of the mind seems to accord with many people's experience. Whatever the scientific status of Freud's theory, it is safe to say that many people have been influenced to think of themselves as Freudian subjects. One can think of themselves this way. The important question for a postmodern feminist is should one?  

There are three basic parts that make up Freud's model of the mind: the id, the ego and the superego. Each is formed by both inner and outer experiences and is at once psychic, somatic, and socio-historical. These multiple forces influencing the formation of self are significant in terms of understanding the relationship of Freud's model of the mind to his conception of society. Freud's subject is

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3 Freud's conception developed and changed over his lifetime; *The Ego and the Id* represents for the most part his final version. The analysis in the following section will focus primarily on this work.

inherently embodied and can and should be understood within the context of culture and history. This model challenges the Enlightenment conception of the subject as an entity that is unaffected by embodiment. Moreover, Freud's subject is ultimately socially constructed, although unlike postmodernists, Freud tempers this social construction of the self with a significant degree of biological determinism.

The basic tenet of Freud's model of the mind is, "[t]he division of the psychical into what is conscious and what is unconscious[.]"\(^5\) It is this idea of the unconscious that is most disruptive of traditional rational philosophical thought. Freud himself realizes this:

> To most people who have been educated in philosophy the idea of anything psychical which is not also conscious is so inconceivable that it seems to them absurd and refutable simply by logic.\(^6\)

The reservoir of the unconscious, according to Freud, is primarily the id. The id is the most primitive part of the mind, and it is the part from which the other parts, over time, develop. The id is completely unconscious and is the repository of most of our drives, instincts, wishes, and desires. The id contains everything psychological that is inherited. It is also the reservoir of the libido, the

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\(^6\)Ibid.
psychic energy of the entire mind, and thus the energy of both the ego and superego are derived from the id. The id, as the locus of the instincts, is connected to the somatic functioning of the organism and supplies energy to satisfy this area as well. We can see that the id is significant in terms of the movement away from the Enlightenment notion of disembodied rational subjectivity. The id is both unconscious and irrational. Moreover, being intricately connected to the somatic functioning of the person, it is necessarily embodied.

The ego is "that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influences of the external world through the system of Pcpt.-Cs [perception-consciousness]. . . . the ego seeks to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the id and its tendencies." The ego comes into existence so that the organism can mediate between itself and the external world. While the id has no awareness of the external world, the ego, through perception and consciousness, is able to take in and process information from the external world: "For the ego, perception plays the part which in the id falls to instinct." The ego moves into and negotiates through the world of objective reality. While the id operates solely on the basis of the "pleasure

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7Ibid., 15.

8Ibid.
principle," the ego obeys the "reality principle." The pleasure principle is the immediate gratification of instinctual needs, while the reality principle is the sublimation of instincts into socially acceptable behavior that conforms to the conventional expectations of parents, authority figures, and society in general.

The ego, which is partly conscious and partly unconscious, is the site of the rational part of the mind. It is the ego that is responsible for the self-preservation of the person. It contains the capacity to calculate, plan, execute action, common sense and reason. While the ego is the locus of rationality, it is, "ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as the mental projection of the surface of the body. . . . besides representing the superficialies of the mental apparatus."

Here we see another aspect of Freud's disruption of the traditional Enlightenment concept of self. The part of the mind which is responsible for rationality has an embodied, relational character, which is in stark contrast to the disengaged, disembodied subject employed by thinkers such as

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10Freud, Ego and Id, 15.

11Freud, Ego and Id, 16 nt 1.
Another striking element of Freud's discussion of the rational element, which has implications for postmodern feminist theory, is that it is inseparable from the irrational. According to Freud, "The ego is not sharply separated from the id; its lower portion merges into it." With this we get to one of the most important, radical, and, I think, most useful elements of Freud's thinking. Our subjective position is not a stable, rule-governed, wholly logical and rational position providing a solid foundation from which we can theorize. Rather it is inextricably bound to the unconscious and irrational as well as to the body and to the psycho-social aspects of our present culture. Within this context the ability to think objectively and in a "purely" rational fashion becomes a rather messy project.

To further complicate this issue, the ego's position, according to Freud, is precarious. Freud writes,

> We see this...ego as a poor creature owing service to three masters and consequently menaced by three dangers: from the external world, from the libido of the id, and from the severity of the super-ego.\(^{13}\)

The final part of the mind to develop is the superego. The superego is both a biological and a cultural construct. If we consider...the origin of the super-ego as we have described it, we shall recognize that it

\(^{12}\text{Freud, Ego and Id, 14.}\)

\(^{13}\text{Ibid., 46.}\)
is the outcome of two highly important factors, one of a biological and the other of a historical nature: namely, the lengthy duration in man of his childhood helplessness and dependence, and the fact of his Oedipus complex. We see then, that the differentiation of the super-ego from the ego is no matter of chance; it represents the most important characteristics of the development both of the individual and of the species; indeed, by giving permanent expression to the influence of the parents it perpetuates the existence of the factors to which it owes its origin.\textsuperscript{14}

The superego is fundamentally a social construction. It is the internalized representation of the authority structures operating in society. (A fundamental structure which is internalized during development of the superego is patriarchy, though Freud himself seems not to have realized this.)

The superego is the internalized representative of parents and other authority figures. It is the moral aspect of the mind and is responsible for our conscious and unconscious feelings of guilt. The superego represents society's interest in maintaining social order. It should be noted that patriarchy is a basic assumption in the development of the superego, for as Freud says, "The super-ego arises, as we know, from an identification with the father taken as a model."\textsuperscript{15}

The superego is developed as a resolution of the

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., 25.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 44.
Oedipus complex. Freud's basic theory of the Oedipus complex differs significantly for boys and girls. In this section I will discuss the Oedipus complex in boys, which Freud takes as the "standard" model. For boys, "an ambivalent attitude to his father and an object-relation of a solely affectionate kind to his mother make up the content of the simple... Oedipus complex in a boy." The boy's primary attachment is to his mother, and he sees his father as a threat to his relationship to his mother. The fact that the boy has intense sexual feelings towards his mother makes him aggressive towards his father, for he sees his father as a competitor for his mother's affection. In order to successfully resolve this conflict, the boy must switch his primary attachment from his mother and begin to identify with his father. Since the boy is attracted to his mother, he fears that his father will know this and try to harm him. He fears, in fact, that his father will castrate him. The key to the successful resolution to the Oedipus complex in boys, according to Freud,

is the discovery of the possibility of castration, as proved by the sight of the female genitals, which forces on him the transformation of his Oedipus complex, and which leads to the creation of his super-ego and thus initiates all the processes that are designed to make the individual

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16Ibid., 22.
find a place in the cultural community.\textsuperscript{17} This fear of castration leads to a repression of the sexual feelings for the mother and those of hostility and aggression towards the father. These feelings are transformed into an identification with the father. The boy notices that he, like the father, has a penis, and therefore that he, like his father, is a man. The resolution of the Oedipus complex is an internalization of the father's authority, and the creation of the superego. Freud holds that the superego while later modified by the internalization of other authority figures, maintains the character of the father.\textsuperscript{18} It should be noted that the resolution of the Oedipus complex and the formation of the superego are the boy's initiation into patriarchy, and indeed into misogyny. "One thing that is left over in men from the influence of the Oedipus complex is a certain amount of disparagement in their attitude towards women, whom they regard as being castrated."\textsuperscript{19}

Freud's structural model of the mind poses important challenges to Enlightenment concepts of subjectivity. In introducing the notion that the mind is not a fully self-


\textsuperscript{18}Freud, Ego and Id, 24.

\textsuperscript{19}Freud, "Female Sexuality," 229.
present rational entity, he has significantly disputed the traditional philosophical concept of subjectivity. His model is one which conceives of the self as non-unitary, with a large irrational and unconscious component. For Freud the self is fundamentally an embodied entity, and therefore gendered. Another essential dimension of the self for Freud is its social construction. According to his model, the self is developed over time. Although Freud does not stress this fact—indeed he sometimes writes as if his model is timeless and universal—it is easy to see, given the importance Freud places on family structure and authority figures, that the socio-historical context in which it develops is crucial. From a postmodern feminist perspective these are valuable contributions to an analysis of subjectivity. A problematic aspect of his model, however, is that it is excessively biologistic. Throughout he assumes the male model to be normative and arrives at some troubling conclusions regarding women. In the next section I will examine Freud's analysis of the Oedipus complex in girls and his discussion of the construction of female sexuality.

Female Sexuality and Gender Construction

According to Freud it is more difficult for girls to overcome the Oedipus complex than it is for boys. This difference is significant, since it is the resolution of the
Oedipus complex that leads to the development of the superego and thus to the child's being able to fully participate in society. "The development of a little girl into a normal woman is more difficult and more complicated, since it includes two extra tasks, to which there is nothing corresponding in the development of a man." These two extra steps involve the girl switching her primary erotic zone from the clitoris to the vagina, and switching from the mother to the father as the primary object of desire. Just as the boys resolution of the Oedipus complex is initiated with his fear of castration, this is the same in girls, but without the positive results. While the boy resolves his Oedipus feelings by identifying with the father and internalizing his father's values and thus integrating himself into society, the girl cannot come to this same conclusion:

Quite different are the effects of the castration complex in the female. She acknowledges the fact of her castration, and with it, too, the superiority of the male and her own inferiority; but she rebels against this unwelcome state of affairs.

It is important to note that Freud thinks that such rebellion can easily lead to neurosis or an "abnormal"

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21 Freud, "Female Sexuality," 225.

22 Freud, "Female Sexuality," 229.
masculinity complex.

The discovery that she is castrated is a turning-point in a girl's growth. Three possible lines of development start from it: one leads to sexual inhibition or to neuroses, the second to change of character in the sense of a masculinity complex, the third, finally, to normal femininity. 23

The little girl thus begins her journey into adulthood with the knowledge that she is inferior since "her self-love is mortified by the comparison with the boy's far superior equipment." 24 According to Freud, this recognition of her lack of the coveted penis can have three possible outcomes in the adult women. She may cease her sexual desire entirely, and thus become frigid, she may defiantly over-emphasize her masculinity (often leading to lesbianism); or she may take the first steps toward definitive femininity by accepting her father as a primary love object and become more passive sexually. 25 Ultimately, however, a woman does not become "normal" until she has a baby, and preferably a boy.

The wish with which the girl turns to her father is no doubt originally the wish for the penis which her mother has refused her and which she now expects from her father. Their feminine situation is only established, however, if the wish for a penis is replaced by one for a baby, if, that is, a baby takes the place of a penis[.] 26

23Freud, "Femininity," 126.

24Ibid.


26Freud, "Femininity," 128.
Freud continues,

A mother is only brought unlimited satisfaction by her relation to a son; this is altogether the most perfect, the most free from ambivalence of all human relationships. A mother can transfer to her son the ambition which she has been obliged to suppress in herself, and can expect from him the satisfaction of all that has been left over in her of her masculinity complex. Even a marriage is not made secure until the wife has succeeded in making her husband her child as well and in acting as a mother to him. 27

The fact that a girl resolves her Oedipus complex differently from a boy has far-reaching social consequences.

According to Freud,

In the absence of fear of castration the chief motive is lacking which leads boys to surmount the Oedipus complex. Girls remain in it for an indeterminate length of time; they demolish it late and, even so, incompletely. In these circumstances the formation of the super-ego must suffer; it cannot attain strength and independence which give it its cultural significance, and feminists are not pleased when we point out to them the effects of this factor upon the average feminine character 28

This account, we observe, is exceedingly biologistic.

Freud insists that he is only being scientific. In opening his discussion of female sexuality and of the Oedipus Complex Freud writes that he is, "bring[ing] forward nothing but observed facts, almost without any speculative

27Ibid., 133-134.

28Freud, "Femininity," 129. For similar attacks on feminists and any others who claim that women and men are equal see "Femininity," 116, 129; "Female Sexuality," 230 nt 1.
additions." But clearly there is more going on here than just careful attention to "observed facts." And Freud himself knows this, for later in the same essay he writes, "If you . . . regard my belief in the influence of the lack of a penis on the configuration of femininity as an idea fixe, I am of course defenseless." Thus Freud is admitting to being defenseless at one of the most crucial junctures in his thought. Almost his entire theory about the roles of women and men in society depend precisely on this idea fixe of Freud's, yet, while he finds it an important enough idea on which to base his theory of sexuality, he cannot provide an argument to defend this position. Freud's theory of gender formation depends on the basic assumption that men, simply by virtue of possessing a penis, are superior to women. And because men have this biological attribute, it follows that they are better suited to running society, which is the basic assumption of patriarchy in Freud's work.

So when Freud says that he is bringing nothing forward but the observed facts and not making any speculations, it is essential to notice the context within which he observes these facts. The context is an implicit assumption that patriarchy is the natural, and in fact the only possible,
structure of society. In developing his theory of sexuality, which is inseparable from his theory of subjectivity (since all subjects are embodied and the various aspects of the mind are, as has been shown, inextricably bound to both the body and to the culture, past and present), Freud is incapable of escaping the confining theoretical framework of patriarchy and misogyny.

Nowhere in this detailed discussion of the construction of gender identity does Freud provide an argument to support his contention that the girl's "equipment is inferior" or that having a penis is in itself something to be desired. While he provides some interesting ideas about the social construction of gender identity (for example, in observing that gender identity is not something given from birth, and in thinking about what it means for a child to think of herself or himself as a girl or a boy) his theory ultimately rests on a biological determinism that is not argued for or supported.

Many feminists have criticized Freud's treatment of female identity formation in general, and his concept of penis envy in particular. Simone de Beauvoir offers one such critique. In the Second Sex Simone de Beauvoir critiques the overall lack of philosophical justification in Freud's work. She points to Freud's lack of concern for the independent destiny of women, claiming that Freud simply adapted his account of the psycho-sexual development of
boys/men to that of girls/women without adequate theoretical support. Beauvoir maintains that Freud simply assumes, with no philosophic or scientific explanation, that "woman feels that she is a mutilated man." Beauvoir continues,

Many psychoanalysts today admit that the young girl may regret not having a penis without believing, however, that it has been removed from her body; and even this regret is not general. It could not arise from a simple anatomical comparison; many little girls, in fact, are late in discovering the masculine construction, and if they do, it is only by sight. The little boy obtains from his penis a living experience that makes it an object of pride to him, but this pride does not necessarily imply a corresponding humiliation for his sisters, since they know the masculine organ in its outward aspect only--this outgrowth, this weak little rod of flesh can in itself inspire them only with indifference, or even disgust. 31

Beauvoir's point is that Freud assumes the male model as normative and thus assumes girls, in comparing themselves to this normative model, feel abnormal or mutilated. Freud gives no consideration to the idea that boys, when comparing themselves to girls, might feel alarmed that they have an extra growth. This is because Freud always assumes the male body and male development to be standard and "normal". Beauvoir criticizes Freud for failing to account for the social origin (as opposed to a purely biological one) of male sovereignty. 32

32 Ibid., 42.
Throughout Freud's discussion of female sexuality, from the Oedipus complex to penis envy, he introduces "normality" as a normative concept that can (and is) used against women. This operates in two ways. First of all, permeating Freud's discussion of female sexuality is the basic idea that male psycho-social-sexual development proceeds along (and indeed establishes) the "normal" trajectory, while female development is "abnormal" in that it deviates from the male route. Male sexual development is put forth by Freud as the standard normative model, leaving females to be classified as "mutilated" deviants. Secondly, there is the notion of "normal" femininity, which, as we have seen, culminates successfully only when a woman becomes compliantly heterosexual and gives birth to a son. A woman who does not follow the prescribed path is not only "abnormal" in the neutral sense of being different, but in the clinical-normative sense of having something wrong with her, and in need of treatment.

Because girls/women cannot follow the regulative model of male sexuality Freud concludes that they often suffer from neurosis. But because Freud is so firmly entrenched in a patriarchal context, he demonstrates a blindness to the possibility that patriarchy is the cause of neurosis and should be changed. In Civilization and Its Discontents when Freud is discussing the etiology of neurosis he writes,

It was discovered that a person becomes neurotic
because he cannot tolerate the amount of frustration which society imposes on him in the service of its cultural ideals, and it was inferred from this that the abolition or reduction of those demands would result in a return to possibilities of happiness.\textsuperscript{33}

Given this description of the etiology of neuroses it is not surprising that Freud found more women then men "neurotic". What is surprising is that Freud himself shows a remarkable lack of insight about how patriarchy and misogyny are factors in the formation of this neurosis. In his discussion of female sexuality, Freud states that a woman can only feel complete and obtain happiness if she has a male child so that she can possess the coveted penis. Freud remarks that with a male child, "a mother can transfer to her son the ambition which she has been obliged to suppress in herself." It seems important to ask why is such a suppression demanded at all. Freud does not seem to think this an issue in need of explanation. Might the explanation be that it is patriarchal society, which does not allow the full participation of women in the public sphere, that demands the suppression and sublimation of women's ambition into socially acceptable behaviors such as raising children. If women were allowed to fully participate in the affairs of society, might this not result in "the return to the possibility of happiness." Therefore, rather than having male children and suppressing their ambitions, it seems that

\textsuperscript{33}Freud, \textit{Civilization and Its Discontents}, 39.
a more effective strategy for women to feel complete and avoid neurosis, even in Freud's own terms, would be the "abolition or reduction" of the demands of a patriarchal society on the submission of women.

According to Freud's model of female sexuality, women, because of their "abnormal" psycho-sexual development, are unable to fully participate in civilization. This is first articulated in his discussion of the superego. As we have seen, the superego is the result of the successful resolution of the Oedipus complex. The superego is important for a person to succeed within society, since it is the superego that allows people to "find a place in the cultural community." The problem, of course, is that Freud has said that it is harder for girls to resolve the Oedipus complex and since successful resolution of the Oedipus complex is necessary in order to develop a strong superego, we can see that Freud will argue that women are not as able to participate fully in civilization. For Freud the superego "answers to everything that is expected of the higher nature of man." "Religion, morality, and a social sense" are to be found in people (men) because of their superego. Thus he can confidently state, "It seems that

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34Freud, "Female Sexuality," 229.

35Freud, Ego and Id, 27.

36Ibid.
women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization."

Freud's theory of female sexuality, despite its obvious misogynist tone, still has much to offer to a postmodern feminist analysis. The major contribution Freud makes is his recognition that sexuality and gender identity are indeed constructed and multi-determined. Freud, however, does not examine how this construction takes place within existing socio-cultural power configurations, much less how his own theories are influenced and constructed within these same power dynamics. He tries to claim scientific legitimacy for his ideas, and maintains that they offer universal explanations, rather than recognizing them as culturally specific. What he does not examine, therefore, is how his own ideas are deeply rooted in patriarchal assumptions, and thus he is led to establish male sexuality as normative and male anatomy as the ideal. Ultimately his concept of gender as constructed is distorted and flawed by his biological determinism. By challenging this biological determinism with a more comprehensive examination of the effects of socialization, we can have a more complete picture of the development of gender and self.

Freud, "Femininity," 132.

One way to subvert Freud's biological determinism is to examine the social construction of biology itself. On the social construction of biological facts, see Judith Butler Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" (New York: Routledge,
Freud's Metanarrative of Civilization

According to Freud's analysis in Civilization and Its Discontents no one can be truly happy in civilization, because civilization goes against our basic instinctual impulses—sexuality and aggression. These impulses, originating from the id, want immediate satisfaction. Freud calls this immediate gratification of our instinctual impulses "the pleasure principle." Civilization, however, demands that we sublimate our instinctual desires into socially acceptable behavior, what Freud terms "the reality principle." According to Freud no one is ever truly happy in civilization because the fundamental human impulse towards individual happiness is in opposition to the basic aim of civilization. In other words, within civilization there is always a conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle.

In order to explain why individual happiness is antithetical to the demands of civilization, Freud constructs a theory as to the origin of civilization.³⁹ Freud claims that the first acts of civilization were tool

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³⁹Freud discusses this in many of his works, but in the following analysis I will focus on Civilization and Its Discontents.
usage, the building of dwellings, and the control over fire. Of these, Freud maintains that the control over fire is most "extraordinary" and "unexampled." He speculates that primal man had a habit of putting out fires by urinating on them. According to Freud this is both satisfaction of infantile desires and an engagement in a homosexual competition of sexual potency. Fire, says Freud, was originally thought of as phallic; indeed Freud says that there is, "no doubt about the originally phallic view taken of tongues of flame as they shoot upwards." Thus by urinating on the fire, men were engaging in a homosexual competitive activity--the phallus of the man who put out the fire was more potent than the phallus of the fire. However, the first person to control his desire and not put out the fire, was able to gain an important advantage--he gains control over nature and makes use of the fire.

While men conquered nature by refraining from micturating on fire, "woman had been appointed guardian of the fire which was held captive on the domestic hearth, because her anatomy made it impossible for her to yield to

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40Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 42.

41In a footnote Freud puts forth a conjecture about the role of fire in the origination of civilization, an idea he develops more in "The Acquisition and Control of Fire."

42Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 42.
the temptation of this desire."\(^{43}\) Freud maintains that there is a connection between, "ambition, fire and urethral eroticism." Freud concludes from this analysis that men are naturally more ambitious than women.

Freud asserts that civilization first appears as an attempt to regulate social relationships. The decisive step in this process is the "replacement of the power of the individual by the power of the community."\(^{44}\) This institutes a form of order in which behavior is regulated by law, and no one is at the mercy of brute force. "The first requisite of civilization, therefore, is that of justice--that is, the assurance that a law once made will not be broken in favor of an individual. This implies nothing of the ethical value of such a law."\(^{45}\) The individual's claim for freedom and liberty is in conflict with the cultural claims of the group as a whole, and in order to maintain order, law is introduced.\(^{46}\)

The first enactment of this crucial replacement of the power of the individual with the power of the community

\(^{43}\)Ibid., 43.

\(^{44}\)Ibid., 49.

\(^{45}\)Ibid.

\(^{46}\)This discussion of justice has many similarities to The Republic Book 2, in which Glaucon makes the case that justice is only an instrumental good. (Socrates, on the other hand, argues that justice is both an instrumental and an intrinsic good.) Freud himself clearly sees justice as an instrumental good.
takes place within the family. In the primitive family,\textsuperscript{47} the father had complete control and ruled without restriction. Above all, he had complete control over all the women, which he kept to himself. In order to limit the authority of the father, the sons banded together to overpower him, thus making the discovery "that a combination can be stronger than a single individual."\textsuperscript{48} Freud continues, "The totemic culture is based on the restrictions which the sons had to impose on one another in order to keep this new state of affairs in being. The taboo observances were the first 'right' or 'law.'"\textsuperscript{49} In banding together to kill the father, a strong sense of fraternity developed, as well as a sense of guilt. Freud contends that this guilt, resulting from this original act of patricide, continues to be stored in our unconscious and is often expressed in religious rituals.

This initial act of patricide marked the transition from the primitive family (or primal horde) to civilization. According to Freud, civilization comes about because man wanted woman—or, as Freud calls it, "his sex object"—available to him on demand, and woman wanted to be with her

\textsuperscript{47}In Civilization and Its Discontents Freud refers to this as the "primitive family" where elsewhere, such as in Totem and Taboo, he speaks of this as the "primal horde."

\textsuperscript{48}Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, 55.

\textsuperscript{49}Ibid.
children. Thus he says that the "parents" of civilization are Eros and Ananke--Love and Necessity. 50

Ultimately, however, civilization comes into conflict with the erotic or sexual love of a man and a woman. Erotic love is the relationship between two people, while civilization depends on the relationship between groups of people. This conflict between erotic love and civilization is expressed in the conflict between the family and the larger community. And it is this conflict that leads to women "retarding and restraining" the development of civilization.

Women...in the beginning, laid the foundations of civilization by the claims of their love. Women represent the interests of the family and of sexual life. The work of civilization has become increasingly the business of men, it confronts them with ever more difficult tasks and compels them to carry out instinctual sublimations of which women are little capable. 51

Freud claims that men have only a limited amount of libidinal energy, which they must distribute between civilization (culture), and women. The more a man uses his libidinal energy for the works of civilization, the less energy he has for his family; consequently, "woman finds herself forced in the background by the claims of

50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., 59.
civilization and then adopts a hostile attitude towards it."\(^52\)

In the previous discussion of the Oedipus complex and the consequent development in woman of a weaker superego, we saw the precursor to this analysis. Freud claims that because women are not as capable as men of sublimation, or channeling their libidinal energy into socially acceptable activities, they are not capable of fully participating in that civilization.

This Freudian metanarrative regarding the origins of civilization has, at its foundation, numerous problematic assumptions. In almost all places his analysis is gendered and either based on, or relates back to, his analysis of the sexual differences between males and females. Freud applies his analysis of penis envy and the Oedipus complex to his analysis of civilization. The lack of a penis is the reason why women are unable to fully participate in civilization, because it is the lack of a penis which ultimately leads to women developing weak superegos, and their inability to successfully sublimate libidinal desires. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud goes so far as to say women "retard" and "restrain" the development of civilization.\(^53\) Freud's conception of the origin of civilization is built on

\(^{52}\)Ibid.

\(^{53}\)Ibid.
his assumption of traditional gender roles, i.e. that men want sex and women want to be with their children. He never questions these traditional ideas about sex roles. He doesn't propose that women might want sexual satisfaction or that men might want to be near their children. Like Engels, Freud's metanarrative presumes a sexual division of labor. Women remain in the home and take care of the children, while men work outside the home. Like so many of his basic assumptions, he never examines, argues for, or explains this one. He just takes it as his implicit starting point.

Freud, like Engels, tries to take seriously the latest findings (in his time) of anthropology. He justifies his primal horde myth by citing Darwin: "Darwin deduced from the habits of the higher apes that men, too, originally lived in comparatively small groups or hordes within which the jealousy of the oldest and strongest male prevented sexual promiscuity." This Darwinian thesis, however, is generally considered false by contemporary anthropologists and biologists. According to Peter Gay, "the conjectures of Darwin and others about the prehistoric horde governed autocratically by a polygamous and monopolitic male did not stand up well to further research. . . . Freud's stirring portrayal of that lethal fraternal rebellion against

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patriarchy seemed increasingly implausible."\textsuperscript{55}

Freud, while critical of Lamarck, was at the same time strongly influenced by him. Freud believed that a primitive, originary patricide was reenacted over and over again during early human history and that each male, even now, has "stored this phylogenetic legacy in his unconscious, including the resulting sense of collective guilt over the primal crime."\textsuperscript{56} Contemporary biology disputes this latter contention. Developmental biology has shown that acquired traits cannot be genetically passed on from one generation to the next.\textsuperscript{57}

In addition to the factual inconsistencies in the Freudian metanarrative, we should also note that its overall import is deeply pessimistic about the possibility for human happiness, now or ever. For Freud any organized society runs counter to individual happiness.

The two urges, the one towards personal happiness and the other towards union with other human beings must struggle with each other in every individual; and so, also, the two processes of


\textsuperscript{57}For discussions of the anthropological basis of Freud's conjecture on the beginning of civilization see: Grunbaum, \textit{Validation in the Clinical Theory of Psychoanalysis}, 276-277; Peter Gay, \textit{Freud: A Life for our Time}, 332-335.
individual and of cultural development must stand in hostile opposition to each other. . . . 58

Because of how he conceives subjectivity—as inherently egoistic and as striving toward individual satisfaction—he cannot see this subject as happy within the context of any society.

It is important to notice that for Freud it is individual happiness which is emphasized. In contrast to Marx, Freud does not think that it is natural to have a communal sense or "species being". The fact that he sees the individual as 'egoistic' influences his idea of social intervention. For him the individual cannot be happy in any type of civilization because "the main aim of individuals is 'egoistic' or the urge toward happiness, while the main emphasis in the development of civilization is 'altruist' or the urge towards union with others in the community." 59 Thus he has no concept of political intervention in the sense that Marx does, that individuals can come together and overthrow a repressive regime and bring about a society that is more conducive to human growth. 60

It would seem that Freud forecloses all possibility for meaningful intervention that would increase human happiness,


59 Ibid., 105.

60 Marx and Freud also have very different views regarding work (*Civilization and Its Discontents*, 55) and private property (*Civilization and Its Discontents*, 70-71).
since he sees civilization as inherently restrictive of individual happiness. He does, however, offer a curious idea for political intervention at the end of Civilization and Its Discontents. After discussing the similarities and differences between the individual and the cultural super-ego, Freud suggests:

If the development of civilization has such a far-reaching similarity to the development of the individual and if it employs the same methods, may we not be justified in reaching the diagnosis that, under the influence of cultural urges, some civilizations, or some epochs of civilization—possibly the whole of mankind—have become "neurotic"? An analytic dissection of such neuroses might lead to therapeutic recommendations which could lay claim to great practical interest. I would not say that an attempt of this kind to carry psycho-analysis over to the cultural community was absurd or doomed to be fruitless.\(^6\)

Here we have Freud suggesting that some societies (one presumes he is speaking of our own) have become excessive in their repression of sexuality, and hence might be able to relax some of their restrictions, making them less neurotic. Still and all, changes of this nature cannot be expected to make to large a difference.

Overall the Freudian metanarrative of civilization is highly conservative: the group is bound to assume ascendency over the individual;\(^6\) people will never really be happy—so

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\(^6\)Again a comparison with Marx's more optimistic vision is in order: for Marx real individuality is enhanced, not crushed, in a truly human society.
why try? The best he can do is suggest that certain societies might themselves be neurotic. Most importantly Freud's metanarrative seems particularly oppressive to woman, since it posits women as relatively incapable of participating fully in the world of politics and work, given their limited capability for the instinctual sublimations upon which civilization is based.

Freud's theories, for all their flaws, do hold some value for a postmodern feminist political praxis. His concept of the self—as decentered, divided, embodied, with a significant irrational component—undermines the Enlightenment idea that the self is primarily a self-reflective rational agent. His concept of the unconscious challenges the Enlightenment idea of knowledge, in that it shows that fully transparent reason is not possible. He introduces the idea that the self is heterogeneous and multidetermined. According to his analysis both the self and gender are constructed by complex forces.

Ultimately, however, Freud's theories are deeply flawed. He attempts to establish the male model of psychosexual development as universal and normative. In attributing universality to his concepts of self and sexuality, he consistently ignores the fact these concepts are gender specific and culturally and historically relative. And because he himself is oblivious to the over-
arching patriarchal dimensions of his analysis, he is blind to the possibility of radically altering patriarchal structures.
Chapter Three

Foucault

Michel Foucault's postmodern philosophy criticizes both Marx and Freud for creating "global, totalitarian theories."¹ He thinks that both Marx and Freud offer totalizing metanarratives of the subject and of history that obscure the operation of power.² There is no concept in Foucauldian philosophy more basic than power. According to Foucault the subject is constituted within various matrices of power. For Foucault there is no subject position outside of these fields of power. If his conception of power is correct, it becomes necessary to reconceive strategies of


political intervention. The revolutionary model described by Marx is inadequate in terms of this reconception of power. Other forms of resistance must be given more prominence.

In this chapter I will first examine Foucault's critique of Marx and the problem of globalizing discourse. Next I will discuss the genealogical method, which Foucault presents as an alternative to such discourses. I will then examine Foucault's discussion of the repressive hypothesis and his critique of Freud. After analyzing Foucault's critique of Marx and Freud, I will look at Foucault's alternative conception of power and of truth and how this relates to his concept of constructed subjectivity. I will examine how his reconceptualization of power, truth, and subjectivity informs his idea of political resistance. Finally, I will defend Foucault against an important criticism levelled against him by Nancy Fraser.

Foucault's Critique of Globalizing Discourse

Much of the literature on Marx and Freud is comprised of various scholars arguing whether or not these theories are really scientific. Scholars try to prove that a discourse such as Marxism or psychoanalysis qualifies as "scientific" in order to appeal to the status and authority of science to legitimate the knowledge and truth established by these discourses. Other scholars challenge the scientific status of the theories in order to deny them such
legitimacy. Foucault claims that in order to establish a discourse as scientific, however, an artificial continuity is imposed by including certain forms of knowledge and excluding others. The narrative structure enforced by these globalizing discourses is one which imposes a rigid, linear analysis that subsumes all theoretical and practical issues under a single rubric of knowledge. \(^3\) Foucault therefore maintains that debating the scientific status of a Marxism or psychoanalysis is the wrong issue to address. Indeed, the very fact that such an issue is raised is indicative of the problem with scientific discourse. The question Foucault asks, as a genealogist, is why do these discourses want to be recognized as scientific?

I would remind you how numerous have been those who for many years now, probably for more than half a century, have questioned whether Marxism was, or was not, a science. ... the same issue has been posed. ... in the case of psychoanalysis. ... But to all these demands of: 'Is it or is it not a science?', ... the genealogist would reply: 'If you really want to know, the fault lies in your very determination to make a science out of Marxism or psychoanalysis. ...'. If we have any objection against Marxism, it lies in the fact that it could effectively be a science. [I]t is surely necessary to question ourselves about our aspirations to the kind of power that is presumed to accompany such a science. It is surely the following kinds of questions that would need to be posed: What types of knowledges do you want to disqualified in the very instant of your demand: 'Is it a science'? Which speaking, discoursing subjects—which subjects of experience and knowledge—do you then

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\(^3\)According to Foucault Marxism is the metanarrative of wealth and economics and Freudian psychoanalysis is the metanarrative of sexuality.
want to 'diminish' when you say: 'I who conduct this discourse am conducting a scientific discourse, and I am a scientist: Which theoretical-political avant garde do you want to enthrone in order to isolate it from all the discontinuous forms of knowledge that circulate about it?'

To proclaim that a certain discourse is scientific is to claim that it is distinguishable as a unified, rational, continuous, hierarchized discourse. According to Foucault, in order to establish such discourses, one ignores the myriad discontinuous, "illegitimate" discourses which also occupy the terrain of knowledge. The proclamation that a discourse is scientific is, according to Foucault, an attempt to bestow authoritarian power upon certain types of knowledge. When certain discourses are seen as authoritarian, the truth that they proclaim is legitimated and becomes hegemonic. The truth of the unauthorized, discontinuous discourses is then seen as illegitimate and subordinate. These illegitimate discourses are thus marginalized. In order to establish a discourse as scientific, therefore, knowledge is unnecessarily delimited and truth circumscribed, which is why Foucault states that, "the attempt to think in terms of totality has in fact proved a hindrance to research."


5Ibid., 81.
It is important to note that it is not the "scientific method" to which Foucault objects, nor does he rule out all science as illegitimate. What he is above all concerned to call into question is the pretence that "science" is neutral and unaffected by the operations of power. This problem is particularly acute when what is claiming to be science is a totalizing metanarrative:

We are concerned . . . with the insurrection of knowledges that are opposed primarily not to the contents, methods or concepts of a science, but to the effects of the centralizing powers which are linked to the institution and functioning of an organized scientific discourse within a society such as ours. Nor does it basically matter all that much that this institutionalization of scientific discourse is embodied in a university, or, more generally, in an educational apparatus, in a theoretical-commercial institution such as psychoanalysis or within the framework of reference that is provided by a political system such as Marxism; for it is really against the effects of the power of a discourse that is considered to be scientific that the genealogy must wage its struggle.  

A major problem with totalizing metanarratives is that any position which challenges the authority of such a narrative is either subsumed into the sameness of the totalizing discourse or is ignored as being illegitimate. According to Foucault, there is a hierarchy to knowledges, and within this structure, the totalizing narratives such as Enlightenment rationality, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, are given a privileged status leaving alternative narratives.

6Ibid., 84.
What Foucault objects to about totalizing metanarratives that claim scientific status is the operation of power which legitimizes certain truths. The power operation within the scientific discourse is the top down juridico-discursive model of power. Truth is said to emanate from these authoritative metanarratives. What is characteristic of the theories of both Marx and Freud is that they fit many disparate concepts under the rubric of their respective theories. What Foucault is interested in exposing through his genealogical critique is both what is left out of these narratives, and what truths are created.

**Genealogical Method**

Foucault's genealogical method involves an examination of how we get to where we are, but without any extrapolating into the future. This method is anti-causal in the sense that it tends to highlight sharp ruptures that could not have been predicted. Genealogy emphasizes discontinuity over continuity. Thus the Marxian dream of "a science of history" is debunked. To understand Foucault's use of the term "genealogy" it might be fruitful to think of the literal meaning of the word. When you trace a person's

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7Of course Marxism is far more marginalized itself these days than when Foucault was writing about it. Marxism is no longer the official ideology of a world's superpower, of all of Eastern Europe, or of powerful Communist Parties in Western Europe.
genealogy, you come up with a list of ancestors—a linkage of the past with the present. But there is no narrative structure here, there is no "logic" to the development—and hence no way of extrapolating into the future. There is something random and accidental about a family tree—so and so happened to marry so and so, and they happened to have children, one of which then married so and so, etc. The lives of one's ancestors are not the precursors of your own, in the sense that they are leading up to yours, and receive their meaning from your life. The lives of each must be evaluated in her or his own terms. Foucault's genealogical method allows us to understand an institution or an epoch (including the present one) as related to the past, but without assuming that we are somehow the culmination of the past, or a stage on the way to something even better.

Genealogy is anticausal (and so antideterministic, anti-reductive) and pays attention to marginal figures and knowledges. These later Foucault terms subjugated knowledges.

By subjugated knowledges one should understand . . . namely, a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity. I . . . believe that it is through the re-emergence of these low-ranking knowledges, these unqualified, even directly disqualified knowledges. . . . and which I would call a popular knowledge. . . . though it is far from being a general common sense knowledge, but is on the contrary a particular, local, regional knowledge, a different knowledge incapable of unanimity. . . . that it is
through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work. ⁸

Foucault puts forth genealogy as an alternative to the tyranny of globalizing knowledges.

What [genealogy] really does is to entertain the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchize and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects. ⁹

Genealogical critique reveals the power operating in the construction and maintenance of these metanarratives. It therefore serves as "traps, demands, challenges" to scientific discourses. Genealogy allows the emergence of these subjugated knowledges to disrupt the hegemony of globalizing discourse. Part of the "tyranny of globalizing discourses" is that they produce normative accounts of both truth and subjectivity.

**Repression, Truth, and Power**

One of the major ways to see how subjects are constructed through scientific discourse is to look at sexuality. As Foucault writes:

[T]he project of a science of the subject has gravitated, in ever narrowing circles, around the question of sex. Causality in the subject, the unconscious of the subject, the truth of the subject in the other who knows, the knowledge he holds unbeknown to him, all this found an

⁸Foucault, "Two Lectures," 82.

⁹Ibid., 83.
opportunity to deploy itself in the discourse of sex. Not, however, by reason of some natural property inherent in sex itself, but by virtue of the tactics of power immanent in this discourse.¹⁰

According to Foucault the science of the subject begins with the question of sex.¹¹ It is in Foucault's discussion of sexuality, especially as it appears in his first volume of The History of Sexuality, that one can see how the subject is constructed through the interplay of power and knowledge, and how power produces truth. One of the reasons that the science of the subject begins with the question of sexuality is that, as Foucault states in an interview, "people are told that the secret of their truth lies in the region of their sex."¹² What is particularly important about people's truth being linked to their sexuality is that this truth of one's sexuality is one that is revealed only through the intervention of expert discourses. One needs the expert then, be it the priest, the analyst, the teacher, to tell one what one's sexuality means and who one "really" is.

Foucault begins his discussion in the first volume of The History of Sexuality with a discussion of the Repressive


Hypotheses. Foucault's analysis here represents a deep and original criticism of Freud, who was the first to give the term "repression" its current sexual connotation.

According to Foucault the Repressive Hypotheses begins with the claim that the seventeenth century initiated an age of sexual repression that continues to this day. This hypotheses asserts that sex increasingly becomes something which one is forbidden to discuss, and that sexual behavior is severely curtailed.

The repression of sexuality is linked to the development of capitalism.

By placing the advent of the age of repression in the seventeenth century, after hundreds of years of open spaces and free expression, one adjusts it to coincide with the development of capitalism: it becomes an integral part of the bourgeois order... A principle of explanation emerges after the fact: if sex is so rigorously repressed, this is because it is incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative. At a time when labor capacity was being systematically exploited, how could this capacity be allowed to dissipate itself in pleasurable pursuits, except in those....that enabled it to reproduce itself?¹³

The political point drawn from the Repressive Hypotheses is that sex itself, and discourse on sex, are repressed, stifled and thus in need of liberation. Moreover, since sexual repression is linked to capitalism, the struggle for sexual "liberation" is part of an even larger political

¹³Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 5-6. Foucault returns to this theme of linking the repressive hypothesis to the development of capitalism several times in the *History of Sexuality*, see 36-37, 114, 120.
struggle. Foucault, however, does not believe that it was the advent of capitalism that required the repression of a workers' sexuality so that the worker could use all of her or his energy for work. One of the reasons he disagrees with this is that controls on sexuality were strongest among the bourgeois, not among the working class.¹⁴

What most interests Foucault is the concept of power implicit in the Repressive Hypothesis. It is a repressive form of power, as opposed to a form of power that would produce something. When one talks of sex as being repressed, the assumption is that there is a true, natural sexuality that is being somehow stifled or distorted by various forms of power. Foucault argues that this is not the case. Rather, the various apparatuses of "repression"—confession, schools, church, etc.—are in fact producing sex. He argues that what is supposedly repressing sex is actually creating it, and that there is no original sexuality that needs to be set free from the bonds of various discourses and acts of repression.¹⁵

¹⁴See Foucault, History of Sexuality, 120-121.

¹⁵The idea of the Repressive Hypotheses has some important implications for feminist theory. There is much debate in feminist circles as to whether there is an essential element to female sexuality that serves to inform what it means to be a woman. Theorists who have this view see society as serving to repress female sexuality, and they see women's liberation lying in the free expression of female sexuality. On the other hand postmodern feminist, such as Judith Butler, do not think that there is an original sexuality which is in need of liberating.
Throughout *The History of Sexuality* Foucault attempts to discredit the Repressive Hypotheses. He does so by doing a genealogy of sexuality. He looks at how discourses of sexuality came about, how truth became linked with sexuality, and how a science of confessional practices was built. In doing this he undercuts the idea that there is any such thing as an original sexuality that is repressed. This analysis is part of his demonstration that the idea of an original essential subject is a false notion, for he continually links subjectivity and sexuality.

According to the Repressive Hypothesis, sex becomes a question of truth; the truth of the subject is revealed through sexuality, specifically in how others interpret the sexuality of one who confesses her or his own sexuality.

The essential point is that sex was not only a matter of sensation and pleasure, of law and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood, that the truth of sex became something fundamental, useful, or dangerous, precious or formidable: in short, that sex was constituted as a problem of truth.\(^{16}\)

It was in the nineteenth century that sex and truth became most explicitly and consciously linked. We can see this linkage of truth and sex in the discourse of Freud. For Freud the major way of understanding the self is through understanding sexuality.\(^{17}\) According to Freudian theory virtually all personality structures can be explained

\(^{16}\)Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 56.

\(^{17}\)For Freud, as we have seen, sexuality is the major way to understand the whole of civilization.
through sexuality, but it is a sexuality that is not manifest. According to Freud, the energy force of the human being is the libido, which is sexual, but it is also largely unconscious. So not only is the truth of subjectivity to be found in sexuality, but much of sexuality is unconscious. The problem then becomes one of bringing what is unconscious to consciousness. This, according to Freud is the goal of psychoanalysis. Such a process requires both a patient, or analysand, and a psychiatrist, the analyst, or to put it into Foucault's words, a confession and an interpreter of that confession.

For Foucault the link between truth and confession—a link strongly preserved in psychoanalysis—has far-reaching implications. "[I]t is in the confession that truth and sex are joined, through the obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret." 18 What is unique about the confession is that the individual produces the truth of her or himself through the narrative of confession, and this "truth" is then interpreted and confirmed by an outside "expert". Through this process discourse creates subjects. Subjects tell of themselves, and through this telling their subjectivity is entwined with the relations of power inherent in the discursive practice. Subjectivity is

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created through the discursive practice of confession.¹⁹

Foucault argues that, while the confession is supposed to be a way for an individual to get to the essential truth of her/himself and lay this bare, it is in fact the confessional practice that produces this truth, and constructs the individual. The sciences of confession, such as psychoanalysis, makes it seem as if there is a core self which is being brought forth through this confessional practice, whereas in fact confessional practices are producing subjects and truth. As Foucault writes, "The truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power."²⁰ This is a productive concept of power which produces both the subject and truth.

What Foucault is trying to show is that the subject is necessarily defined within many power relationships, the confession being one of these.

The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained

¹⁹According to Foucault this practice of confession, which is then taken up by psychoanalysis, became prominent in the middle ages with the codification of the sacrament of penance by the Lateran Council in 1215. (History of Sexuality, 58.)

"Confession" is by no means confined to religious rituals or psychotherapy. In the late twentieth century we see mass media magnifying confessional practices. Talk shows abound with confessions both of the "ordinary person" and of the celebrity. "Tell all" books have become increasingly popular. Politicians are confessing. Our society is one increasingly permeated by confession.

²⁰Foucault, History of Sexuality, 58-59.
in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, 'demands' only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation. 21

When one is confessing, therefore, one feels as if one is revealing the truth of one's being, the truth that has been repressed, and through the act of confession one is overcoming a repressive power that would keep one from the truth of oneself. Through the act of confession, therefore, one unveils the very truth of one's subjectivity. These, says Foucault, are traditional themes in philosophy: "Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom." 22 It is precisely these traditional themes "which a 'political history of truth' would have to overturn by showing that truth is not by nature free--nor error servile--but that its production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power." 23

In this crucial statement Foucault challenges the conception of truth so deeply ingrained in Western philosophy. He is saying that the philosophical notion that truth is free of power, that it is somehow removed from the

21Ibid., 60.

22Ibid.

23Ibid.
taint of power relationships, is a false one. Truth, according to Foucault, does not exist independently of human relationships and social practices in a universal metaphysical, metapolitical realm. There are no Platonic Forms nor any Cartesian grounds for apodictic certainty. Rather truth is something that is produced, and this production takes place within a terrain of various relationships of power.

Foucault challenges the basis of traditional philosophy, which holds that truth is something which operates beyond the dynamics of power. It should be noted that the "truth" Foucault is talking about here is not what Anglo-American philosophers tend to think of as the problem of truth, namely the relationship between propositions and "facts," the sort of thing that occupies epistemologists and philosophers of science, but a different conception also inherent in Western philosophy, the "truth" of one's being or of one's society or of one's epoch, and the notion that if one can penetrate the world of appearances to grasp these "truths," that this is a step toward liberation. According to Foucault, there isn't any "true" nature that is being suppressed and that can serve as a foundation for ethical or political critique.

Foucault is also challenging the Cartesian notion of subjectivity. He is saying that both truth and subjectivity are produced through power. Foucault urges us to reconceive
power. As he says, "'Sexuality' is far more of a positive product of power than power was ever repression of sexuality. I believe that it is precisely these positive mechanisms that need to be investigated, and here one must free oneself of the juridical schematism of all previous characterizations of the nature of power."24

That power is productive and not merely repressive is a basic theme in much of Foucault's work. In *Power/knowledge*, for example, he writes:

> But it seems to me that repression is quite inadequate of capturing what is precisely the productive aspect of power. In defining the effects of power as repression, one adopts a purely juridical conception of such power, one identifies power with a law which says no, power is taken above all as carrying the force of a prohibition. Now I believe that this is a wholly negative, narrow, skeletal conception of power, one which has been curiously widespread.... What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. 25

Foucault calls the traditional form of power the juridico-discursive model of power. This is the model of power with which both Marx and Freud operate. In *Disciplining Foucault* Jana Sawicki gives a good summation of the three basic assumptions of this model of power.

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25Ibid., 119.
1. Power is possessed (for instance, by the individuals in the state of nature, by a class, by the people).

2. Power flows from a centralized source form top to bottom (for instance, law, the economy, the state.

3. Power is primarily repressive in its exercise (a prohibition backed by sanctions).  

This is the type of power that is assumed in the repressive hypothesis. It is then assumed that the practices of confession allow one to overcome this juridico-discursive model of power. Foucault's model of power is that of productive power. Sawicki summarizes productive power in this way:

1. Power is exercised rather than possessed.

2. Power is not primarily repressive, but productive.

3. Power is analyzed as coming from the bottom up.  

According to this analysis of power as productive and omnipresent, nothing, including discourses of rationality and truth, is free of power.

**Subjectivity**

Adherents of Enlightenment philosophy tend to conceive of subjectivity as pertaining to a unified agent, a unified "self," acting within a horizon that is ultimately rational. As Jane Flax has observed,

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26 Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault*, 20.

27 Ibid., 21.
In the modern West, being a self and subjectivity are inseparable. Hence our understandings of subjectivity are necessarily affected by the concept of self we adopt. Two views of the self have been dominant in post-seventeenth century Western cultures. One is the Cartesian concept of the self as an ahistoric, solid, indwelling entity that grounds the possibility of rational thought and in turn is accessible and transparent to such thought. The defining characteristic of this self is its ability to engage in abstract rational thought, including thought about its own thought. Such thought is said to be undermined by the empirical, social or bodily experience of the thinker. The second view is the Humean-empirical one. In this view, the self and its knowledge are derived from sense experience. Any adequate account of subjectivity and thought must therefore be rendered in terms that can be expressed in, referred to or tested by intersubjectively transmissible empirical experience.28

Foucault's concept of subjectivity is, among other things, a reaction to the cogito as conceived by Descartes. Cartesian philosophy establishes the cogito as an absolute foundation of knowledge. The cogito is a rational agent that is completely present to itself. As Descartes writes in his "Reply to the First Objections, "I can affirm with certainty that there is nothing in me of which I am not in any way conscious."29 The purpose of Descartes meditations is to establish a firm foundation for knowledge. The cogito is just such a foundation. Descartes thus moves from the knowledge of the cogito to knowledge of the external world.


For Descartes knowledge of the self comes first. We then pass from knowledge of the self to knowledge of the external world. The existence of the *cogito* is not determined by or founded on the external world. The *cogito* is the *foundation* of knowledge.

Like Descartes, Foucault also places an emphasis on the self. Unlike Descartes, however, Foucault does not see the self as establishing a foundation for knowledge. The directionality of Foucault's philosophy is the opposite of Descartes. For Descartes the existence of the *cogito* is independent of the material world, including, of course, the body (which is necessarily part of the material world). For Foucault the self is necessarily imbedded in the material world and indeed *constructed* by the world. Descartes' methodology in establishing the foundation of the *cogito* is radical doubt. Through his method of radical doubt Descartes wants to establish an absolute foundation for knowledge. The method of radical doubt is a means of establishing a criterion of truth. The purpose of radical doubt is to establish an absolutely certain foundation for knowledge.

Foucault's philosophy questions almost every aspect of Descartes' project. Foucault's method is, as we have seen, genealogical. His genealogical method is also a way of questioning "the conditions of possibility, modalities and
constitution of the 'objects' and domains"\(^3^0\) of knowledge and the self, but his approach is fundamentally different from Descartes'. For Foucault the self and his genealogical method are related as follows:

One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. And this is what I would call genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc., without having to make references to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history.\(^3^1\)

Foucault's genealogical method requires that one look at how the self is constructed through history; one should not rely on the self as a foundation for knowledge. For Foucault, any concept of an unchanging, essential first principle is suspect. When Foucault says that we must "dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself," he is not saying that we no longer have an operative notion of subjectivity or that there is no subject of thought, or subject who can think and act. What he is saying is that we must "account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework." This is not to say that one is to look at how the essential rational agent posited by Descartes evolves over time, or how our

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\(^3^0\)Foucault, "Truth and Power," 116.

\(^3^1\)Ibid., 117.
understanding of that subjectivity evolves over time. Rather Foucault's genealogical method, being one which goes from the outside world to the inner world, or from the material world to the subjective world, looks at how the subject is constructed in and through the material world—specifically by the operation of the various power configurations that constitute the world.

Unlike Descartes, Foucault does not think that we can appeal to a disengaged subject who can serve as the foundation for knowledge. His genealogical approach is a reaction to just such a concept of a foundational transcendental agent. Genealogy "can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history."32 Rather then looking for a certain foundation of knowledge, Foucault wants to examine how various forms of knowledge develop and become hegemonic. His examination of subjectivity follows the same pattern.

While Foucault says he wants to "get rid of the subject itself," his analysis is focused on the idea of subjectivity. In "The Subject and Power," Foucault writes, "[W]hat has been the goal of my work during the last twenty years has been to create a history of the different modes by

32Ibid.
which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects."

Foucault goes on to outline some of the major themes of his work and how they have been related to the question of subjectivity. "My work has dealt with three modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects." Notice from this wording, we see that for Foucault human beings are not automatically subjects, rather we become subjects through the process of socialization, of being inserted in, and defined by, the many power dynamics that make up our world. Our subjectivity is something that is inscribed on us from the outside, it is not an essential element of our nature that we learn through introspection.

The first of the three modes of objectification of the modern subject is scientific classification.

The first in the modes of inquiry which try to give themselves the status of sciences; for example, the objectivizing of the speaking subject in *grammaire generale*, philology, and linguistics. . .the objectivizing of the productive subject, the subject who labors, in the analysis of wealth and economics. . .the objectivizing of the sheer fact of being alive in natural history or biology.

With these examples Foucault outlines a theme which we have already discussed. The natural and social sciences,

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34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.
Foucault argues, are not value free objective discourses. Rather, they are totalizing narratives bisected by value judgments and power dynamics. It is through these scientific classifications that human beings gain knowledge of themselves, how they think, speak, act, relate, etc.

By examining these "scientific" disciplines from a genealogical perspective, Foucault shows that they are not completely autonomous coherent narratives dealing with universals of human social life, but rather that they are necessarily embedded in multiple and intersecting relationships of power, which prevent them from progressing logically, but rather cause them to undergo abrupt changes at specific historical junctures. As the disciplines through which we categorize human nature go through abrupt changes, so does our understanding of specific aspects of human nature.

The second mode of objectifying the subject is what can be called "dividing practices". "The subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others. This process objectivizes him. Examples are the mad and the insane, the sick and the healthy, the criminals and the 'good boys.'"\(^3^6\) These dividing practices are another way that social norms, communicated through scientific knowledges and practices, are inscribed on the individual. The discourses of science help to create categories through which we classify and

\(^{3^6}\text{Ibid.}\)
identity human beings. It is through this process that the subject is created. It is not that there are essential human differences, and human beings are then divided up according to these differences, but rather it is the knowledge we gain through various "scientific" discourses that we use to classify human beings.

To give but one example, consider Foucault's discussion of the effect on (creation of) family and morality through the architecture of houses.

[T]he house remains until the eighteenth century an undifferentiated space. There are rooms: one sleeps, eats, receives visitors in them, it doesn't matter which. Then gradually space becomes specified and functional. . . . The working-class family is to be fixed; by assigning it a living space with a room that serves as kitchen and dining-room, a room for the parents which is the place of procreation, and a room for the children, one prescribes a form of morality for the family. Sometimes. . . you have a boys' and a girls' room.37

The division of spaces leads to a division of people and to the creation of subjects. An important element in this discussion as well, is the creation of morality. Not only are subjects created through dividing practices, but so are concepts of morality. Sexual mores are created with the implementation of a separate space for boys and girls as well as for parents. A certain idea of family is created by this spacing, and a particular idea of sexuality. When boys and girls are separated into separate rooms, and adults and

37Michel Foucault, "The Eye of Power," in Power/knowledge, 148-149.
children are separated, the idea is constructed that boys and girls need to be divided, that they are different and that they should remain so, that things go on privately between boys and girls that neither should know about. And the same for the adults. Things go on between parents in the privacy of their room which children should not know about.

What is important here is the idea that this separation of people through spatial arrangements is not according to some inherent element in subjects or according to some transcendent moral principle, but rather that the dividing practices themselves create both subjectivity and morality. What is at stake here is the operation of power through spaces.

A whole history remains to be written of spaces - which would at the same time be the history of powers. . . . from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat, institutional architecture from the classroom to the design of hospitals, passing via economic and political installations. It is surprising how long the problem of space took to emerge as a historico-political problem. Space used to be either dis-missed as belonging to 'nature'-that is, the given, the basic conditions, 'physical geography', in other words a sort of 'prehistoric' stratum; or else it was conceived as the residential site or field of expansion of peoples, of a culture, a language or a State. 38

The third mode of objectification of subjects is the

38Ibid., 149.
way human being turns him/herself into a subject. The other two modes of objectifying the subject are passive. In the scientific discourses and in the dividing practices the subject itself is not active in its own creation. In this third mode the subject is active. One of the key elements of Foucault's discussion of this mode is that we gain knowledge of who we are by looking at discourses outside ourselves. In particular, for modern subjects, we try to find out who we are by learning what various experts, psychiatrists, biologists, etc., say we are. We then attempt to take this external knowledge and apply it to ourselves. We are separated from ourselves through lack of knowledge. Consequently we need the intervention of outside discourses and experts in order to get to know ourselves. The consequence is that we construct ourselves with the help of external "expert" narratives about how we are supposed to be. In this way subjects partake of their own self-

39 This is one of the few places in which Foucault refers to human beings as both male and female. Something that is lacking in this examination of subjectivity is the gender specific aspect of subject formation. Foucault's lack of discussion of gender in his discussion of subjectivity has been criticized by many feminist scholars. Some aspects of this critique will be examined in the following two chapters.

A current example of this would be the proliferation of self-help books. One reads these books in order to find out how one is "supposed to be" or how one can fix oneself. Women's magazines in particular abound with experts telling women how to apply various knowledges to herself, such as knowledge of sexuality, fashion, emotions, and how she can then create herself according to these sanctioned normative standards.
formation. A subject position is constructed through these various knowledges that subjects rely on to understand themselves. While the subject thinks that there is an inherent self that these various practices such as confession and psychiatry may help her to understand or exhume, Foucault maintains that there is no original subject that these knowledges help us to understand, but rather that we construct ourselves in the process of applying knowledges to ourselves.

Resistance

Foucault makes an important contribution to political philosophy in that he shows that all relationships are relationships of power, and that all discourses are always already conducted within this terrain of power. There is no sacred realm which is free of these operations of power. What makes this important in terms of politics (and particular emancipatory politics) is that it opens up points of contestation and of resistance. Foucault's analysis of power, in showing that power goes from the bottom up, that power is everywhere, even in the very construction of truth, sexuality, and subjectivity, opens up these areas to politically engaged critique. Philosophy traditionally goes from the macro-level to the micro-level, from the metaphysics of truth down to its local and particular applications. Foucault argues that power relationships at the micro-level of society produce these macro-level
discourses; thus the political project is not to free truth from its contestation within power, but to expose the constructed hegemony of certain discourses which claim the authority of being true: "It's not a matter of emancipation truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time."^41

Some of Foucault's critics have maintained that because power is everywhere, there is little or no room for resistance.~ To the contrary the multiplicity of power relationships opens up the field of resistance, and it is in this that I find its greatest benefit for postmodern feminist emancipatory political praxis. Foucault writes:

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. . . . These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case;

^41 Foucault, "Truth and Power," 133.

resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent.  

In his essay "The Subject and Power" Foucault states much the same thing, "[T]here is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight." Once he has reconceptualized power, Foucault can open up the field of viable resistance. Marx's concept of power, as we have seen, suggests only the model of revolution, whereas Foucault's concept of power opens up the possibility for various acts of resistance—while at the same time not foreclosing the possibility of revolution.

What Foucault's analysis points out is that resistance can take many forms at the same time. We can have local resistances as well as large scale resistances. What his analysis allows for, indeed demands, is multiple strategies of resistance, including the practices of our everyday life.

Are there no great radical ruptures, massive binary divisions, then? Occasionally, yes. But more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds.

While not dispensing with the idea of a revolution in the

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43 Foucault, History of Sexuality, 96.

44 Foucault, "Subject and Power," 225.

45 Foucault, History of Sexuality, 95.
Marxian sense, Foucault's analysis opens up new avenues of resistance, such as that of reconceiving subjectivity. As we have seen, neither truth nor subjectivity are free of power relationships. It now becomes clear how Foucault's notion of subjectivity is related to his concept of political intervention. Just as truth and knowledge and sexuality are constructed, so is subjectivity. And the subject is constructed within the terrain of power operations. So the subject itself becomes a point of political resistance.

Maybe the most certain of all philosophical problems is the problem of the present time, and of what we are, in this very moment. . . . The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state's institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries.46

What Foucault is pointing to here, and what is similar to what he has said in History of Sexuality, is that reconceiving of subjectivity is itself an act of political resistance. This is another place where we see the way paved for postmodern feminist theory. Clearly a project of postmodern feminist theory is to "promote new forms of subjectivity" through the refusal of the genderless subject that has been the agent of Western philosophical thought.

46 Foucault, "Subject and Power," 216.
For Foucault the act of political resistance is inseparable from subjectivity, because he recognizes that the act of constructing a subject is always a political act.

It must be said that Foucault does not develop adequately the gendered aspects of subjectivity, nor the manner in which a specifically feminist emancipatory practice can come out of his work. These issues are addressed, as we shall see, by both Jane Flax and Judith Butler. In the following two chapters I will examine postmodern feminist critiques and appropriations of Foucault's philosophy. I think that Foucault's analysis of power and resistance, which form his concept of constructed subjectivity, are highly useful for grounding an emancipatory postmodern feminist politics. I think, however, that the specific feminist implications of his analysis need to be made more clear. One also needs to examine more specifically the role of gender in constructing subjectivity.

Fraser Critique

Let me conclude this chapter by examining an important criticism of Foucault. I will demonstrate that this criticism, although widespread, fails to grasp the true nature of Foucault's philosophy. Foucault's analysis of the discursive production of truth and power has had a major impact on social and political philosophy. Some argue that his philosophy opens up possibilities of political practice
(especially for an engaged emancipatory politics), while others think his deconstruction of metapolitical rationalism leads to both relativism and nihilism. In other words, some contend that Foucault's philosophy is significant precisely because it deconstructs Enlightenment concepts of rationalism, while others think this disruption forecloses possibilities of a just political praxis.

In a series of influential articles, Nancy Fraser has criticized the normative ambiguities in Michel Foucault's work, by which she means that he at once suspends and invokes normative frameworks.47 She concludes that for Foucault to have an adequate political philosophy, he must have a more clearly articulated normative framework.

Nancy Fraser's central critique of Foucault concerns the alleged normative ambiguity of Foucault's analysis of power. Fraser claims that his ambiguous normative framework renders his philosophy incapable of laying the ground for an engaged politics.48 The implicit assumption of Fraser's critique is that a viable and just political philosophy is not possible if one cannot appeal to a transcendentally-

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48 Fraser, "Foucault on Modern Power."
grounded normative framework.  

Fraser questions whether Foucault's work can be simultaneously politically engaged and normatively neutral. She claims that Foucault's work suspends or "brackets" the standard modern liberal normative framework, which distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate exercise of power. Fraser is using the term "bracketing" as it is used in the phenomenological tradition. Within this tradition the term bracketing is associated primarily with Husserl. As Husserl uses this term, it means disconnecting assumptions about the existence status of the spatio-temporal world of our everyday, pre-reflexive experience, as well as the multitude of theories (scientific, theological, social, and cultural) which comprise the natural attitude. It is this later part of the

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49 Fraser is herself ambiguous with regards to transcendentally grounded normativity. In some instances she seems to distance herself from transcendental grounding. (See, for example, "Foucault: A 'Young Conservative'?" p. 42.) Yet time and again she criticizes Foucault for lacking an "adequate" normative framework, which, I believe, betrays a longing for a transcendental trump upon which to ground political theory. (See, for example, "Foucault on Modern Power" pp. 26-33; "Foucault: A 'Young Conservative'?" p.36, p.43; "Foucault's Body Language: A Posthumanist Political Rhetoric?" p.64.

50 Fraser, "Foucault on Power," p. 19.

51 Fraser, "Foucault on Power," p. 18.

phenomenological reduction--specifically these theories that comprise the natural attitude--that Fraser invokes. Fraser claims that Foucault brackets the normative framework. One way he does this is by suspending the categories of truth and falsity.\textsuperscript{53}

But in setting up her critique of Foucault based on the assumption of bracketing, Fraser misses crucial features of his analysis of power, and misconstrues the purpose of his genealogies. Rather than \textit{bracketing} normativity, I think it is clear that Foucault is \textit{deconstructing} the modern liberal normative framework, together with the categories of truth and falsity. Foucault's analysis of power and truth is a thinking over and against the normative framework associated with traditional metaphysics. As we have seen, he shows the historical and cultural specificity of such a construction as true/false. The purpose of his analysis of power via genealogical method is to challenge the possibility of a transcendental grounding of truth disengaged from power. Thus he calls into question the dichotomies true/false and legitimate/illegitimate, thereby opening up these concepts to strategic redeployment.

Let me clarify what I mean by "deconstruction." In "Contingent Foundations" Judith Butler writes, "To deconstruct is not to negate or to dismiss, but to call into question and, perhaps most importantly, to open up a term .

\textsuperscript{53}Fraser, "Foucault on Power," pp. 20-1.
Deconstruction is thus a disruption of foundational, metapolitical, and hegemonic positions such as "a power-free zone of rights." Foucault's position is not a simple negation or dismissal. Rather it is a calling into question and an opening up of such concepts of rights, truth, and legitimacy so that they may be strategically redeployed in previously unauthorized ways. Rather than being a neutral and unengaged suspension of normativity, such a project is fundamentally an engaged critique.

It is an important question, whether or not one can deconstruct absolute categories of truth and falsity and still have a viable and just politics. However, Fraser avoids such an engaged critique of Foucault by misreading him. Fraser says Foucault refrains "from problematizing the normative validity of power/knowledge regimes".55 By this Fraser means that he does not address the question of the legitimacy of the various institutions and practices which he studies. But Foucault's genealogical analysis of power is a problematizing of the normative validity of power/knowledge regimes. He does this, not by questioning whether or not such regimes are legitimate, but rather by questioning the framework of normativity for evaluating

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55Fraser, "Foucault on Power," p. 21.
By saying that he is *bracketing* the normative framework Fraser misses the key move of Foucauldian philosophy, namely the opening up of such terms as normativity, truth, and legitimacy to a reusage and redeployment. In other words Foucault is *deconstructing* the normative framework, not *bracketing* it. Foucault specifically deconstructs the traditional question of political philosophy: the scope and limits of the legitimate exercise of political power. He asks instead, what relationships of power are operative in constructing the truth claims of the normative framework being invoked. Foucault attempts to show that the liberal normative framework of power, legitimate vs. illegitimate power, points to the wrong question. The problematic that shapes Foucault's work is rather, "what rules of right are implemented by the relations of power in the production of discourses of truth?"\(^\text{56}\)

In order to examine this problem, he looks at the production and relationships of power. This examination is a deconstruction of the liberal normative framework of legitimacy/illegitimacy. This examination of power is meant to challenge the totalizing narrative on which liberal notions of normativity are built and to disrupt the

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hegemonic metapolitical position of such a normative model. In challenging the top-down juridico-discursive model of power, and instead conceiving of power as permeating all discourses, Foucault necessarily and intentionally disrupts the liberal normative model.

Fraser notes correctly that

The liberal framework understands power as emanating from the sovereign and imposing itself upon the subjects. It tries to define a power-free zone of rights, the penetration of which is illegitimate. Illegitimate power is understood as oppression, itself understood as the transgression of a limit.\textsuperscript{57}

It is precisely against such a "power-free zone of rights" that Foucault is arguing. He does not think there is any such zone and is therefore arguing for a reconceptualization and reusage of the concept of both rights and of domination. According to Foucault all rights are necessarily constructed within the matrix of power, so there is no such thing as a power-free zone of rights.

What is called for here is a reconception of rights, an opening up of the term which necessarily leads to a reconceptualization and redeployment of politics. Political intervention then becomes a project, not of protecting inalienable rights, but rather one of waging power in a more strategically effective matter.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{57}Fraser, "Foucault on Power," p. 26.

\textsuperscript{58}This thesis will be elaborated more fully in Chapters Four and Five.
As a part of her critique of the normative ambiguities in Foucault's work, Fraser makes several claims about the efficacy of his argument for grounding a politics. One of her claims is that if Foucault wants to discuss domination when analyzing power, then he must either invoke the liberal normative framework or provide some alternative framework. She concludes that "Foucault's empirical thesis that modern power is capillary does not by itself dictate the adoption of any particular normative framework. At most, it undercuts one traditional basis of the liberal one."  

This does not seem to be stated strongly enough. Foucault's theory of power necessarily disrupts any concept of normativity. One must always examine the power dynamics within which the normative is produced. Examining the normative as historically and situationally specific is basic to the genealogical method.

Fraser goes on to say that "in using the term 'domination' at the same time that he is ruling out the liberal normative framework, it appears that he is presupposing some alternative framework."  Here she assumes that any engaged political critique of power must be based on some concept of normativity. But this presupposition betrays Fraser's perhaps unwitting commitment to the classical liberal normative tradition, a tradition

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59 Fraser, "Foucault on Power," p. 27.
60 Fraser, "Foucault on Power," p. 27.
which I shall argue prematurely forecloses the emancipatory potential of politics by conceiving of normativity as metapolitical. (It is precisely this premature foreclosure that postmodern philosophy seeks to avoid.)

Fraser concludes that Foucault "fails to appreciate the degree to which the normative is embedded in and infused throughout the whole of language at every level and the degree to which despite himself, his own critique has to make use of modes of description, interpretation, and judgement formed within the modern Western normative tradition".61 I would argue that most of Foucault's analysis is directed precisely at deconstructing this normative framework.

The positive effect of this deconstruction can be seen by considering the "politics of everyday life," which Fraser herself calls "probably the single most important feature of Foucault's thought."

In revealing the capillary character of modern power and thereby ruling out crude ideology critique, statism, and economism, Foucault can be understood as in effect ruling in what is often called 'politics of everyday life.' For if power is instantiated in mundane social practices and relations, then efforts to dismantle or transform the regime must address those practices and relations.62

One of Foucault's major efforts at dismantling or transforming social structures involves deconstructing the

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61 Fraser, "Foucault on Power," pp. 30-1.
concept of normativity operating in the practices and relations of everyday life. Foucault's analysis of truth and power is one which looks at how the hegemonic normative position has been produced and what operations of power it conceals. As I have argued, Foucault does not suspend the normative framework; rather his politics of everyday life is a deconstruction of such a framework.

While I disagree with Fraser's contention that Foucault suspends analysis of the liberal normative framework in his examination of power and in the end invokes such a framework in order to establish a foundation for resistance, I do think she shows the significance of his analysis of power to feminist theory. I agree that he provides the empirical and conceptual basis for treating such phenomena as sexuality, the family, schools, psychiatry, medicine, social science, and the like as political problems. It thereby widens the arena within which people may collectively confront, understand, and seek to change the character of their lives.  

Fraser praises the importance of Foucault for expanding the political arena. This has particular significance for feminist theorists, much of whose work involves analyzing the politics of such things as sexuality, family, school, etc. What Fraser does not acknowledge, and what is one of the most important aspects of Foucault's work for postmodern feminist theory, is that Foucault politicizes the liberal

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concept of normativity, including the politicization of such concepts as rights, legitimacy, and truth.

Fraser claims that Foucault is unable to fully suspend the liberal normative framework, but rather that he presupposes it. I think this conclusion comes from Fraser's own inability to suspend the liberal notion of normativity when she reads Foucault. Her inability to recognize Foucault's deconstruction of normativity leads her to conclude that normative ambiguity necessarily forecloses emancipatory politics and is necessarily unsatisfactory. Fraser is unable to discern Foucault's discussion of power as a deconstruction of normativity because she is too firmly ensconced within the traditional liberal normative framework. She cannot conceive of a normatively ambiguous political philosophy with emancipatory potential.

Yet this is precisely what, in my view, is presently needed.

Much of the critique concerning the lack of normativity in postmodernism is that it makes political practice impossible because there is no foundation in which to ground political activity.

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64 Fraser, "Foucault on Power," p. 30.

65 "...what Foucault needs," writes Fraser, "and needs desperately, are normative criteria for distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable forms of power" (Ibid., p.33). I think this is clearly Fraser's need, not Foucault's.

66 I will elaborate on and defend this claim throughout the rest of this dissertation.
We may question...whether Foucault's rhetoric really does the job of distinguishing better from worse regimes of social practices; whether it really does the job of identifying forms of domination (or whether it overlooks some and/or misrecognizes others); whether it really does the job of distinguishing fruitful from unfruitful, acceptable from unacceptable forms of resistance to domination; and finally, whether it really does the job of suggesting not simply that change is possible but also what sort of change is desirable. 67

What Foucault argues is that disrupting a foundation grounded in concepts of transcendental rationality and truth that themselves conceal relationships of domination is itself a politically necessary and just move. It is often argued that for Foucault there is no possibility of just political action because there can be no prioritizing of actions or no basis for choosing between just and unjust causes: it is assumed, in other words, that if one does not appeal to transcendental truth or universal justice, then there will simply be a chaotic situation of free flowing nonprioritized difference. This is a misinterpretation of what genealogy demands. In unveiling power configurations one is acting justly. I think that what critics of postmodern political practice find most hard to accept is this unavailability of a "transcendental trump". It is incorrectly assumed that without a universal measure of the good, which provides a foundation for neutrality and normativity, there can be no justice. What this position

67 Fraser, "Foucault on Power," p. 43.
ignores are the systems of domination concealed within the
to claim as constitutive and
therefore necessary to just political practice.

Far from being the nihilistic threat that Fraser and
others would claim, the critique of normative foundations
offered by Foucault, and as we shall see, Flax, and Butler
represents a democratic engagement in the political field.
This requires interrogating the "ruse of authority" of
normative and universal categories such as legitimacy that
claim to be free of the contestations of power dynamics. At
the heart of Foucault's radical political project is just
such a deconstructing of foundational premises such as truth
and universality. It is important to note that questioning,
deconstructing, reconfiguring and resignifying
foundationalist categories is not the same as doing away
with them or bracketing them. Butler, as we shall see,
reconfigures the universal as a site of permanent contest,
rather than as a politically neutral foundation on which to
base other political contests. This opening of the
universal to critique, and thereby bringing it into the
democratic process, does not however mean that politics and
philosophy become nihilistic and relativistic; on the
contrary it is a radical democratization of political
philosophy.

It seems to me that Fraser (and most other critics of
postmodernism) appeal, implicitly or explicitly to a
substantive universal presumed to be well-grounded. But
once the universal becomes a contested category—which it
now is—there can be no metapolitical grounding for
emancipatory politics. It is precisely in this demand to
interrogate the hegemony of universal categories, among them
normative concepts such as legitimacy and rights, that the
emancipatory potential of such politics lies. This move of
deconstructing hegemonic foundations radically reconfigures both the discursive terrain of politics as well as concrete practices. Part of this deconstruction is the politicization (through genealogical critique) of metapolitical normativity. Genealogical critique reveals that any metapolitical normative framework is always already politically constituted. Any normative assumption is necessarily an authoritative move to cover over operations of power by labeling them as metapolitical and thus excluding them from critique. The liberatory potential of such radical disruption is great. For Fraser, ambiguity is necessarily wrong, whereas I strongly agree with Foucault, (and Flax, and Butler), that ambiguity is the only position possible from which to effectively enact an emancipatory democratic politics.
Chapter Four
Flax

In this chapter I will outline Flax's concepts of subjectivity, rationality and justice, and examine how she positions her theory in relationship to Freud, Marx, and Foucault. Flax situates her theory of subjectivity with specific reference to the discourses of psychoanalysis, feminism, and postmodernism. While she is clearly a feminist thinker, as an analysis of gender is central to most of her theorizing, her relationship to psychoanalysis and postmodernism is less clear. Flax's discussion of subjectivity makes continuous reference to psychoanalysis, feminist theory, and postmodernism, so it is almost impossible to look at her work apart from a critique of these discourses. Flax's own theorizing moves in and out of these three discourses, showing how they both reflect and contribute to the contemporary philosophical debates about knowledge, power, rationality, and justice, as well as showing how they can lead to useful concept of subjectivity for the late twentieth century.

Throughout her examination of these discourses, she, like myself, places the examination of subjectivity in the forefront.
As old ways of understanding subjectivity are thrown into doubt, crises of representation, knowledge, power and legitimacy intensify. Contemporary psychoanalytic, feminist and postmodernist theorists both reflect and contribute to these crises.¹

Flax's concern with subjectivity mirrors that of my overall project. Throughout this work I have been examining the relationship of various concepts and theories of subjectivity to political praxis, with the aim of determining which concept of subjectivity is most useful for grounding an emancipatory feminist politics, Flax states a similar objective:

Considering the weight the modern subject is expected to carry, it is not surprising that a central debate in contemporary political discourse concerns the nature of subjectivity and its possible relations to emancipatory action. One recurrent question in these debates is what kind of self is required for effective struggles against domination.²

Flax herself concludes that, "a unitary self is unnecessary, impossible and a dangerous illusion."³ What is important about Flax's attention to the often conflicting discourses of psychoanalysis, feminism and postmodernism is that in her attempt to situate her own concept of subjectivity within

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²Ibid.

³Ibid.
the context of these discourses, she allows for the fact that the subject position can be fluid and variable.

On Freud

Rather than analyzing the entirety of Flax's discussion of psychoanalysis, I will focus on her discussion of Freud's concept of subjectivity. Flax applies elements from postmodernist and feminist discourses in order to criticize Freud. Of course she is not the first thinker to examine Freud in light of these discourses, but she is dissatisfied with conclusions commonly drawn: "Postmodernists appropriate Freud's concept of the 'decentered' self but radically reduce its complexity and consequences. Some feminists simply reject all of psychoanalytic theory because of the truly ignorant and offensive ways Freud sometimes analyzes women."4

Flax begins her own analysis by pointing out that Freud's work has an ambiguous relationship to Enlightenment thinking. In important ways it is disruptive of such thought, but in other equally important ways it is conscripted within the Enlightenment narrative. One of the major tenets of Enlightenment thought that is challenged by Freud is the primacy of rationality in the organization of subjectivity. Rather than saying humans are primarily

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4 Jane Flax, Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 50.
rational thinkers as would modern philosophers,
in [Freud's] view humans are originally and primarily desiring creatures. Our being is not defined by the capacity to reason, as Plato and Kant believe; by the ability to speak, reason and engage in political deliberation, as Aristotle argues; or by the power to produce objects of value and need, as Marx claims. 'The core of our being,' according to Freud, consists of... [u]nconscious wishful impulses, most of which are forever inaccessible to our preconscious or conscious, will nonetheless remain the dominating force in our mental life.5

Flax emphasizes that for Freud desire, which is often unconscious, displaces reason as the primary quality of human beings. As I discussed in the chapter on Freud, Freud's introduction of the analysis of desire and the unconscious into an analysis of self functioned to radically disrupt the role of rationality.

[T]he self in Freud's theories becomes increasingly fragmented, decentered, and heterogeneous in its qualities and dynamics. Forces are always affecting our 'rational' thought and behavior, but these forces can be (at best) only imperfectly known or comprehended. The agency of our knowing is 'contaminated' by the influence of these unconscious forces, including desire.6

One can read Flax as saying that with Freud, the Cartesian self becomes 'contaminated.' Uncertainty and ambiguity, in the form of the unconscious and desire, are introduced at the core of the rational subject. It is through this displacement of the rational subject and of the

5Ibid., 53.
6Ibid., 59.
centrality of rationality in understanding ourselves and our world that Freud has affinity with postmodern thinkers. Flax puts it this way,

As postmodernists argue, Freud's increasingly complex structural theories undermine the concepts of mind upon which Enlightenment concepts of knowledge depend. . . . Unlike many philosophers Freud conceptualizes the mind as full embodied, inherently conflictual, dynamic, nonunitary, and constituted in and through processes that are intrinsically different and cannot be synthesized or organized into a permanent, hierarchical organization of functions or control. Both the rationalist's faith in the powers of reason and the empiricist's belief in the reliability of sense perception and observation are grounded in and depend on the mind's capacity to be at least partially undetermined by the effects of the body, passions, and social authority or convention. However, Freud's theories of mind render such beliefs highly problematic. 7

One of the most significant aspects of Freud's concept of subjectivity for Flax is that it allows for, and indeed introduces the necessity of, ambiguity. For Flax it is also important that while Freud decenters the self, he neither says the self does not exist, nor does he reduce the complexity of an analysis of subjectivity. Unlike Foucault, who focuses on external relations of power and their role in the construction of self, Freud looks at the internal dynamics of subjectivity, such as the power relationships between the id, ego, and superego. Flax emphasizes as well the fact that Freud focuses on the somatic construction of self, which is necessarily biological.

7Ibid., 60.
While Freud's discourse in many ways challenges Enlightenment concepts, especially the privileging of rationality, Flax concludes that in important ways he is in complicity with the Enlightenment metanarrative.

In many ways ... Freud's thinking remains within the Enlightenment project. His emphasis on the liberating power of rational insight; his individualistic concept of the self; his distrust of the 'irrational,' including 'illusions' such as religion as well as the unconscious; and his insistence on the importance to the individual and to culture of the defense of the ego and reason against the 'irrational' demands of desire or authority place him firmly within the 'master narratives' of the Enlightenment. Freud's ... move to locate and conflate women, the irrational, desire, and nature 'outside' and against culture are also congruent with and contribute to the persistence of these narratives. 8

While she recognizes Freud's contribution to our knowledge of the irrational and decentered subject, she thinks that Freud ultimately pulls back from the full implications of these ideas. Even though he has an extended discussion of the irrational, he ultimately contends that rationality is normative. 9 Flax's concept of a multiple and fluid self, which learns to thrive among ambiguities, is one which does not privilege the rational over the irrational, nor the individualistic self over the relational self.

Flax systematically attacks the gendered dichotomy in Freud's work. According to this analysis Freud associates femininity with nature, other, libido economics, body and

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8Ibid., 228-229.

9See my discussion of this in Chapter Two.
patient. Masculinity, on the other hand, is associated with culture, self, object relations theory, mind, and analyst.\textsuperscript{10}

Flax, who does not want the 'master narratives' of the Enlightenment to predominate, thinks that one needs to have a dialogue between feminism and both Freudianism and postmodernism so as to erode the hegemony of any one of these theories. She thinks that both postmodernists and Freudian discourse can benefit from a more rigorous analysis of gender. Not only have "Postmodernists... paid insufficient attention to many of the obscuring effects of the riddle of sex on and within psychoanalytic discourses" but also "the evidence that even Freud's supposedly gender-neutral concepts are affected by gender relations ought to encourage more psychoanalysts and postmodernists to attend more seriously to feminist theories."\textsuperscript{11} Flax maintains that, while much of Freud's analysis concerning gender is deeply flawed, his analysis also opens up the space for debate and allows for ambiguity. Flax summarizes the relationship of feminist theorists to Freud's work by acknowledging this ambiguity.

Feminist theorists offer ambivalent and conflicting evaluations of psychoanalysis. Some simply reject it because of Freud's patently masculinist biases. Other feminists have found

\textsuperscript{10}For a discussion of these "gendered antimonies" pervading Freud's work see Thinking Fragments 77-88.

\textsuperscript{11}Flax, Thinking Fragments, 77.
the paradoxes in psychoanalytic theory a useful and revealing object of analysis. . . . The second approach is more fruitful. Unexamined anxieties about gender and gender relations do pervade, structure, and constrict the entire body of Freud's work.\(^\text{12}\)

**On Marx**

While Flax applies the discourses of postmodernism and feminism to critique Freud, she applies Freud to critique Marx. She writes,

> Psychoanalysis illuminates some of the deficiencies and failures of Marxism. From a psychoanalyst's perspective, Marxist accounts of human subjectivity and intersubjectivity appear particularly thin and impoverished. Psychoanalysts investigate the importance of fantasy, desire, families, and sexuality in the constitution of individual subjectivity, in the behavior of persons in the 'outside' world, and in the structure of social institutions such as the state. Once one begins to identify the effects of unconscious processes class conflict forfeits its privileged (or exclusive) role as the dynamic force of human history.\(^\text{13}\)

The failures and deficiencies that psychoanalysis illuminates in Marxism are the absence in Marxism of an analysis of sexuality and fantasy. Flax also criticizes Marx from both a Foucauldian and a feminist perspective. Like Foucault, Flax is concerned that Marx's analysis claims the authority of a transcendental truth and does not recognize the historically specific power relationships within which

\(^{12}\text{Ibid., 76.}\)

\(^{13}\text{Jane Flax, Disputed Subjects: Essays on Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Philosophy (New York: Routledge, 1993), 11.}\)
the analysis is constructed.

Claims to neutrality or knowledge of objective scientific laws violate Marx's own accounts of the historical and social constitution of knowledge. Their plausibility eventually relies on a transcendental trump. Marxist theorists employ such trumps as positing mental access to the 'iron laws of history' or the ontological and epistemological privilege of a particular sort of 'labor' (or of the class that engages in it). Alternatively one is required to make a leap of faith that 'in the last instance' certain (economic) factors will be determinative. . . . Everyone might be better off if we acknowledge we are all operating on the terrain of power and not truth or objectivity. What counts as 'better knowledge' depends in part on its utility for particular political ends.14

This critique of objective truth claims and her conclusion that knowledge is formed within a terrain of power and is therefore not neutral or transcendental is identical to Foucault's analysis. It is essentially a genealogical critique. Flax applies this methodology to criticize Marx's idea of human nature. She is suspicious of "Marx's promotion of sensuous practical activity (or labor defined as the production of use values) as the human essence."15 Flax thinks that this "reflects rather than provides a thorough critique of capitalist societies."16 In doing a genealogical critique she challenges the claims to transcendental truth on which Marx establishes his theory by exposing the power relationships that are operating to form

14 Ibid., 12.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.
such truths. She concludes,

Theorists will evaluate these arrangements according to the ethical, psychological, and political commitments that pervade and motivate their work. While such arrangements are necessary they may not always be considered the definitive human activity. 'Materialist' accounts of history may appear more appealing to us precisely because we live in capitalist cultures in which other vocabularies and ways of life, for example, ones based on civic virtue, kinship, faith, or aesthetics, are marginalized. After all, why should Marxism be less marked by the social determination of thought than any other theory?  

Flax is also critical of Marx from a feminist perspective. Her analysis of Marxism in terms of gender is similar to my own. She concludes that "the gender biases in Marxist theories are foundational, necessary, and disabling. Especially important are the gendered character of its constituting ideas such as labor, class, and history. None of these ideas seem to account to or include the effects of male-dominant gender systems or many of the activities historically performed by women." My own analysis of Marx came to a similar conclusion. Flax concludes that Marx's theory is "fatally flawed"—although she acknowledges the perspectival and postmodern character of her judgement: "My belief that Marxist theory is fatally flawed, rather than usefully imperfect, undoubtedly has many irrational, aesthetic, and idiosyncratic determinants. It is certainly possible to arrive at a different position from the same set

17Ibid.

18Ibid., 13.
On Foucault

While much of Flax's own analysis relies on basic Foucauldian conceptions of power and knowledge, and her own method is an adaption of Foucault's genealogical critique, she does offer some insightful criticisms of Foucault. Applying her usual method of critiquing one discourse from the perspective of the another, she employs feminist discourse to critique postmodernism, specifically Foucault, for not giving adequate consideration to issues of gender, including the construction of the category of woman, and she uses psychoanalytic discourse to critique Foucault's concept of a socially constructed self.

Flax criticizes Foucault because, while his philosophy stresses retrieval of the marginalized and repressed, he rarely mentions women. His own analysis is uninformed by any explicit or implicit reference to feminist theory.

Foucault mentions women as one of the subjected or marginalized and resisting elements within contemporary culture. He stresses the need to pay attention to the minute, local, and differentiated forms of events and power that are said to constitute 'history.' However he does not consider the feminist claim that in important ways the histories of men and women are themselves differentiated and heterogeneous. Foucault's histories seem totally uninformed by any awareness of feminist narratives of his major subjects... Systematic consideration of gender relations would profoundly effect his genealogies of

\[19^{19}\text{Ibid.}\]
sexuality, subjectivity, power, and knowledge. In critiquing Foucault's concept of self, Flax argues that Foucault ignores the role of intimate social relationships in the construction of self as well as the role of gender. Flax claims that Foucault can ignore the role of these relationships in the formation of self, because they are "displaced" by Foucault's "insistence on self as an effect of discourse." Flax offers an alternative conception:

A social self would come to be partially in and through powerful, affective relationships with other persons. These relations with others and our feelings and fantasies about them, along with experiences of embodiedness also mediated by such relations, can come to constitute an 'inner' self that is neither simply fictive nor 'natural.' Such a self is simultaneously embodied, gendered, social, and unique. It is capable of telling stories and of conceiving and experiencing itself in all these ways.

Flax sees this neglect of intimate social relations as linked to postmodernisms inadequate attention to gender. Postmodernist narratives about subjectivity are inadequate. As postmodernists construct subjectivity, only two alternatives appear: a 'false' unitary and essentialist self or an equally nondifferentiated but totally historically . . .constituted 'true' one. The nature of this dichotomy itself is partially determined by the absence of any systematic consideration of gender or gender relations. Within postmodernist discourses there is no attempt to incorporate or do justice to the

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20 Flax, Thinking Fragments, 212.

21 Ibid., 231.

22 Ibid., 232.
specificity of women's experiences or desires as discussed by women ourselves. Women's experiences of subjectivity suggest there are alternatives to the two presented within postmodernist discourses.23

Flax is particularly critical of Foucault's contention that the self is the effect of "discourse." She contrasts a self derived from concrete social relations with a postmodern self deriving from "fictions" or "textual" convention. She prefers
to argue that 'the self' is social and in some important ways gendered. Hence any self or concept of it must be differentiated, local, and historical. Gender can be used as a lever against essentialist or ahistoric notions of self. A feminist deconstruction of the self, however, would point toward locating self and its experiences in concrete social relations, not only in fictive or purely textual convention.24

I agree with Flax that Foucault neglects gender (as I have already noted). I also agree that Foucault has ignored intimate relations. However, Foucault does not set up a "false" unitary self against a "true" constructed self--since he deconstructs the concept of "truth."25 Nor does

23Ibid., 210.

24Ibid., 232.

25By the time she writes "Multiples" and "Minerva's Owl" (both found in Disputed Subjects) she becomes less rigid with this either/or structuring of the subjectivity debate and more comfortable with ambiguity, fluidity, and multiplicity. In these later works she embraces the varied positionality called for by Foucault. Her views on Foucault's concept of constructed subjectivity undergo significant change from her early discussion in Thinking Fragments, in which she is quite critical of this concept of subjectivity and does not think it is an adequate theory in which to ground an emancipatory feminist politics, to her
"discourse" exclude attention to intimate relationships. While it is true that Foucault's analysis for the most part ignores such relationships as parent, friend, or lover, his analysis emphasizes power, and calls our attention to its "microphysics," which is appropriate for analyzing these intimate relationships. Even intimate relationships need to be interpreted; hence prevailing discourses do enter in, even at the intimate level. By applying his analysis of power to such relationships, we can add a more nuanced dimension to our understanding of these relationships.26

The Multiple self

As we have seen, Freud offers a model of a nonunified self that does not (always) privilege rationality, while Foucault offers a model of a socially constructed self. One of Flax's important contributions to our developing an

later discussion of subjectivity in Disputed Subjects, in which she employs this concept of constructed subjectivity. Once she enriches Foucault's concept of subjectivity with an analysis of gender, she is able to see the potential of this concept to advance emancipatory feminist politics. In Thinking Fragments she intimates that such a move—supplementing Foucault's concept of self with an analysis of gender—would indeed allow for the adoption of such a concept of self for feminist emancipatory politics.

26For example, many contemporary feminist theorists have used Foucault's analysis of power to analyze the relationship of mothering. See for examples Jane Flax, "Forgotten Forms of Close Combat: Mothers and Daughters Revisited," chap. in Disputed Subjects; Jana Sawicki, "Feminism and the Power of Foucauldian Discourse: Foucault and Mothering Theory," and "Disciplining Mothers: Feminism and the New Reproductive Technologies," chapters in Disciplining Foucault (New York: Routledge, 1991).
adequate notion of subjectivity is her attempt to combine
the insights of these two thinkers, giving us a constructed,
non-unitary self.

Contemporary critics of the instrumental, overly
abstract or rationalistic self have undermined the
plausibility and desirability of any form of
transcendental subjectivity. These concepts of
self grew out of and reflect a particular
historical context whose projects, practices and
pressures have either been exhausted or are no
longer useful to us. Their apparent existence is
contingent also upon the repression or denial of
many other, interrelated aspects of
subjectivity. 27

Flax does not dismiss the concept of a unified rational
subject altogether. "We might want to foreground these modes
of subjectivity [the instrumental, overly abstract or
rationalistic] for certain purposes." However, "they are
insufficient as a regulative ideals and as prescriptions for
the highest level of human maturity or the definitive human
capacity." 28 This is an extremely important point.

Enlightenment philosophy is based not only on the positing
of a unified rational subject and a general privileging of
rationality, but on the demand that this is the only
philosophically viable position. The unified Cartesian
subject and the discourse of rationality with which this
subject conducts its philosophical speculations becomes the
regulative ideal. This dual model--Cartesian subject and
rational discourse--becomes prescriptive. The rational

27 Flax, "Multiples," 33-34.

28 Ibid., 34.
agent is seen by Enlightenment philosophy as the highest level of subjectivity, and rational thought is the definitive human capacity. These are precisely the ideas that Flax challenges. But it is crucial to see that by advocating a fluid, decentered, constructed concept of subjectivity, one is not dismissing the rational agent and rational discourse as untenable. What one is doing is disrupting the prescriptive, regulative, hegemonic role this concept of subjectivity has played throughout modern philosophy and to allow it to be one aspect of what Flax calls the multiple self. What she is trying to name is the denaturalized subject position that is both decentered within itself in that, unlike Descartes cogito it is not a logical agent who is completely self-present to itself, and decentered within the discourses that make up Enlightenment philosophy. Unlike Descartes' cogito, which is firmly embedded in the hegemonic discourse of rationality, the constructed subject is constructed within multiple discourses, none of which are hegemonic.

There are many feminist theorists who think that it is dangerous to eliminate the rational unified self, and that in so doing we are foreclosing the liberatory potential of feminist theory.29 Flax, however, supports the Foucauldian idea of a constructed subject, but a constructed, multiple,

29See Jane Flax Thinking Fragments, 230, where Flax discusses the fact that some feminist think woman need an Enlightenment.
gendered, subject. "Gendered categories cannot be destabilized if we insist on their necessity as a foundation for 'emancipatory' knowledge."\textsuperscript{30} For Flax, one does not need to ground an emancipatory politics in a unified subject, and she, like Foucault, considers the very need to do so a politically motivated one. She extends Foucault's analysis, however, to specifically consider the gendered aspect of subjectivity and feminist emancipatory politics.

Contrary to the claims (or fears) of some, I do not believe the possibility of effective feminist politics requires the ability to represent a unitary woman or even a singular multiple category of women. A number of assumptions and wishes motivate this hankering for a universal. It is a trace of the continuing operation of Enlightenment belief systems and the absences of useful alternatives to them.\textsuperscript{31}

Flax clarifies what she means by the multiple self and how she situates this concept in reference to psychoanalysis, feminism, and postmodernism.

Psychoanalysis, feminism and postmodernism all require concepts of subjectivity that are fluid rather than solid and process-oriented rather than topographical. These theories and practices require a mechanics of fluids in which subjectivity is conceived as a set of processes rather than as a fixed entity locatable in a homogeneous, delimited time and space. Such concepts will also be more congruent with and do more justice to the complexities of subjectivity that we encounter. Psychic 'structures' are actually complex clusters of capabilities, modes of processing, altering and retaining experience, and foci of affect, somatic effects and


\textsuperscript{31}Ibid., 26.
transformation of process into various kinds of languages, fantasy, delusion, defenses, thought and modes of relating to self and others. These structures are actually the consequences of the crosshatching of manly lines of heterogeneous experience and capacities. When enough lines are layered over each other, a solid entity may appear to form. Yet the fluidity of the lines remains and what felt solid and real may subsequently separate and reform.  

She concludes that the "Subject is a shifting and always changing intersection of complex, contradictory and unfinished processes." The idea of contradiction is an important one. These multiple subject positions do not have to coalesce in a coherent whole; divergent and often contradictory positions can coexist within a single subject.

On Rationality

The critique of rationality, which Flax shares with postmodernism, is highly controversial. It is often argued that if we do not posit human subjectivity as essentially rational, it is impossible to argue coherently, or struggle effectively, for emancipation. Flax disagrees strongly.

What kinds of subjectivity resist domination and struggle for something else? Unlike Kant, Habermas, John Rawls, or some contemporary feminists I argue that a subject in whom rationality is the privileged quality cannot sustain emancipatory struggles. [We must] explore the possibilities of fluid, multiple subjectivities whose desires for differences will impel them toward resisting (inner or external)

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33 Ibid., 39.
Flax questions the assumed necessity of the link between rationality and justice:

It is questionable whether there are any necessary or intrinsic relations between reason, however defined, and justice. Why should we believe that reason is privileged or primary for the self or justice? There are many factors upon which the development of subjectivity, self-understanding, and justice depends. These factors include political practices; child rearing and education; the absence of economic, race, or gender-based relations of domination; empathy; fantasy; feelings; imagination; and embodiment. Why should we believe that reason is, can, or should be independent of the contingencies of intersubjectivity, embodiment, language, social relations, or the unconscious?35

It is important to understand that postmodern and feminist critiques of rationality do not call for the wholesale abandonment of reason. But they do point out that an excessive preoccupation with reason can be counterproductive. In Flax's view,

rationalistic approaches to justice are doomed to fail and are counterproductive. They block the development of other capacities, such as empathy and appreciation for otherness, which are required for the effective exercise of justice. They encourage and depend upon pathological forms of subjectivity. . . . Thinking is radically split off and experienced as operating independently of the rest of subjectivity, including our relatedness to and dependence on others. The development and maintenance of such forms of abstract rationality require intrapsychic and interpersonal relations of domination. The effects of such domination cannot be contained by

34 Flax, *Disputed Subjects*, xii.

rational principles or law or social structures devised by philosopher-kings.\textsuperscript{36}

The postmodern feminist critique of rationality is one of its most important and most controversial positions. Since this critique is frequently misunderstood, and indeed, often caricatured, let me clarify some of its components. There are at least three principle elements to this critique—rationality as character defect, rationality as an interpersonal/political weapon, and an over-reliance on "argument" in discussion.

Defining "man" as a "rational animal," i.e., making rationality the cornerstone of humanity, gives impetus to a personality type obsessed with principles and consistency. This obsession (as Flax notes in the above quote) can block the development of other capacities. The critique of rationality is not meant to glorify the "irrational"—people who are truly insane—but rather, to suggest that moral and psychic maturity means being able to live with a certain degree of contradiction and confusion.

The second element in the critique of rationality involves noting how the charge of "irrational" or "inconsistent" can be, and regularly is, deployed to silence disturbing voices—especially, but not exclusively, those of women. When a "different voice" is trying to make itself heard, there is inevitably a groping, an attempt at

\textsuperscript{36}Ibid., 116-117.
articulation that is imperfect. Such inconsistencies, etc., are forgiven or glossed when coming from the dominant tradition, but are mercilessly pursued when coming from a marginalized voice.

The third element in the postmodern critique calls into question an over-reliance on "argument" in discussion. Instead of developing skills at empathetic listening, or seeing the point of, for example story telling as opposed to logical deduction, one is trained to adopt an adversarial approach to the speaker that involves throwing up counterexamples, demanding clear and precise definitions, etc.

The postmodern feminist critique of rationality does not propose to discard "rationality" altogether. Inconsistencies, for example, should give one pause. And one does want to be able to dispute a "bad argument." But to make genuine progress about real issues, one has to be able to tolerate a certain amount of unclarity and inconsistency. One cannot resolve all ambiguities and paradoxes; one cannot always dot every "i" and cross every "t". Ambiguities and inconsistencies are often fruitful ways of keeping the conversation going.

**On Justice**

Flax agrees with Foucault as I do, that for theorists of emancipatory politics there is a danger in assuming that there is only one correct stance or subject position from
which to theorize or to wage resistance. Foucault's conception of power is most useful in that it suggests the importance of having many fronts from which to wage battle against multiple systems of domination. Flax enriches Foucault's analysis by adding the dimensions of gender and interpersonal relationships. Ambiguity, fluidity, and multiplicity are a necessity when one understands that the subject is constructed through multiple matrices of power and will thus necessarily change as the grids of power shift. This is not a weakness, but a strategical necessity.

But a different conception of the subject entails a different conception of justice. "Better theories of justice will require different accounts of what subjectivity might be. It is both possible and necessary to develop nonrationalist concepts of subjectivity and justice."37

The question then needs to be addressed as to "what practices of justice would multiple subjects desire and sustain?"38 Flax addresses this question in her essay "The Play of Justice." Many theorists, Nancy Fraser among them, as we have seen, claim that the postmodern subject lacks the ability to make normative validity claims and thus eschews ethically defensible politics. Flax disagrees. As she states, "there is no inherent contradiction between postmodernist commitments to the play of differences and

37Ibid., 111.

38Flax, Disputed Subjects, vii.
ethical ones. Quite the contrary, full commitment to the play of differences requires resistance to the relations of domination and development of new theories and practices of justice."³⁹ What Flax's defense of postmodern ethics claims is that by deconstructing normative models of subjectivity and justice one does not eliminate justice; in fact such a deconstruction enriches it.

One aspect of . . . deconstructive projects is to loosen the hold of transcendental or rationalistic theories of subjectivity and justice. There are good reasons to undermine our belief in such ideas. We believe that objective truth and justice are interdependent, but this is not necessarily the case. It is unnecessary and even dangerous to assume that the existence and practice of justice requires any transcendental grounding. Even if we abandon all notions of transcendental truth and a reason capable of grasping it, we can still formulate and articulate theories and practices of justice. Our choice is not necessarily between grounding justice in objective truth claims (judged by reason) or domination.⁴⁰

Foucault shows the differential power relationships of domination that operate to form the traditional philosophical concept of transcendental truth. His analysis, which deconstructs the category of truth, implies that truth and justice are not inextricably interdependent. Flax extends this genealogical critique to justice itself. It was shown in the Foucault chapter that one need not appeal to a transcendental notion of truth in order to have

³⁹Ibid.

a viable philosophy. Flax extends this argument to show that one need not appeal to a rational subject with access to a transcendental notion of justice in order to have a viable political theory. What is required is a reconceptualization of justice. For Flax (and I agree) not only is non-normative ethics possible, it is necessary.

Much of the critique concerning the lack of normativity in postmodernism is that it makes political practice impossible because there is no foundation in which to ground political activity. What Foucault and Flax argue, however, is that disrupting a foundation grounded in concepts of transcendental rationality and truth that themselves conceal relationships of domination is itself a politically necessary and ethically just move. It is often argued then that there is no possibility of just political action because there can be no prioritizing of actions or basis on which to choose between just and unjust causes. It is assumed that if one does not appeal to a transcendental truth, then the there will simply be a chaotic situation of free flowing nonprioritized difference. This too is a simplified reading of what postmodern feminism demands.

Postmodernism does not entail a belief that all differences are equal or reconcilable. The number of forms of life that can coexist peacefully is necessarily limited. Conflict and power (in its generative and constraining modes) are intrinsic to all social relations, including politics. However, postmodernists recognize the unavailability of any transcendental trump or universal measure of the good. They forsake the hope that there could be transdiscursive rules or
neutral procedures to resolve disagreements. Rules are discourse specific and have limited and heterogeneous effects. The possibility always exists that some conflicts cannot be resolved peacefully or to the satisfaction of all disputants.\textsuperscript{41}

As I argued earlier, what critics of postmodern political practice, such as Fraser, find most difficult to accept is this unavailability of a "transcendental trump". It is incorrectly assumed that without a universal measure of the good to provide a foundation for neutrality and normativity, there can be no justice. What this position ignores are the systems of domination concealed within the very foundation they want to claim as constitutive of just political practice. It does not follow that all situations are equal, or that we cannot choose any political action because we have no transcendental concepts to which we can appeal. Flax writes, "All differences are not equal nor do they deserve the same political consideration. However, positing abstract principles or essentialist claims about human nature will not help us sort out which differences ought to be respected within particular political arrangements."\textsuperscript{42} On the contrary, "it is. . .likely that the plausibility of any universal claim depends upon its congruence with existing relations of power. The appearance of universality may require that the qualities central to the least powerful are

\textsuperscript{41}Flax, \textit{Disputed Subjects}, vii.

\textsuperscript{42}Flax, "The Play of Justice," 111.
It is important to notice how Flax's discussion of justice is inseparable from a discussion of subjectivity. According to Plato, Kant, Rawls among others, it is necessarily the rational agent that grounds a theory of justice. This is why the postmodern disruption of such agency is considered irreconcilable with any concept of ethical political practice. Flax builds on her concept of subjectivity as constructed, multiple, fluid, and relational, and reconceives of justice as a process.

Justice is not a finite state or permanent set of rules or principles (contrary to the arguments of writers as diverse as Plato or Rawls). It is an ongoing process in and through which our goals and purposes will change. Justice can be better understood and approximated if we think of it as interrelated practices. These practices have the best possibility of developing and being sustained and effective within transitional spaces. Such spaces are generated by, depend upon, and reflect more than the operation of any form of reason. The domination of certain forms of reason may actually inhibit or block their development.\textsuperscript{44}

I think that this is a viable concept of justice (or at least a viable outline of a concept of justice) on which to base a postmodern feminist emancipatory political practice. It is a concept of justice appropriate to the postmodern feminist project, which is disruptive, playful, antifoundational, decentered, and fragmented, yet, I think, profoundly liberatory. By redefining justice, and

\textsuperscript{43}Ibid., 113.
\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., 112.
liberating it from its previously enmeshed relationship with reason, we are free to engage in new kinds of political practices. The scope of how we conceptualized political practice has been partially limited by our conception of justice. Once we can free subjectivity, political practice, and justice from the limited narrative of rationality, a complex and exciting terrain opens up in which we can begin to invent new forms of theorizing and acting.

Evaluation

Flax's conception of justice as primarily a process and one that privileges relationships over the individual rational agent is a conception that emerges directly from her concept of feminist theory.

Feminists point to the pervasive effects of gender relations and to a division of labor in which relationships, nurturance, and caretaking necessarily conflict with autonomy, reason, and history making. Relational work and capacities are assigned to women, defined as irrational or arising purely out of bodily necessity and devalued. The isolated agent and (his) pure reason become the social/political hero.\footnote{Ibid., 117.}

We can see that the reconceptualizing of justice as a non-normative process, which is not based on the rational agent has not only postmodern resonances but feminist ones as well. To the extent that feminist theorists are concerned with analyzing how gender is constructed and constituted through various interpretations of biology and sex, a
theory of justice that allows us to question the relationships of domination concealed within normative ideals is necessary.

To the extent that feminist theory is concerned with analyzing gender, most of Flax's own work is done with reference to this problematic. She defines as the goal of feminist theory, "to analyze gender relations: how gender relations are constituted and experienced and how we think or, equally important, do not think about them." While she discusses many feminist theories, including psychoanalytic, standpoint, dual systems theory and socialist feminist, to the extent that she is concerned with the construction of the category gender, she is clearly within a postmodern framework. In her later work she refers to gender as a "historical artifact;" and does not think that gender is determined by a pregiven, unchangeable biological substratum but rather reflects structures of power, language and social practices and our struggles with and against these structures.

However in her earlier work she is reluctant to give up essentialist notions of self and gender. In Thinking Fragments, for example, her description of feminist theory is much more suspicious of the postmodern project and is

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47 Flax, "Multiples," 36.
reluctant to break completely with the Enlightenment concept of an essentialist, unified self.

Although feminist theorists seem to undermine essential properties of the Enlightenment self, they are also unable to abandon it fully. The relations of feminist theorizing to the postmodernist project of deconstructing the self and the Enlightenment are necessarily ambivalent. In many ways women never 'had' an Enlightenment. Enlightenment discourse was not meant to include women, and its coherence depends partially on our continuing exclusion.48

The shift in Flax's position, which goes unremarked by her, points to something problematic in her work. Flax claims that psychoanalysis, feminism, and postmodernism are transitional ways of thinking, which allow us to challenge the authority and rigidity of Enlightenment narratives by disrupting the hegemony of transcendental truth, rationality, and justice. Her proposed project, which she replicates in almost all of her work, is to stage a dialogue between the narratives of psychoanalysis, feminism, and postmodernism. I think that she partially undermines the usefulness of her own work, however, by replicating what she most wants to challenge. By this I mean she tends to exacerbate the rigidity of the positions of psychoanalysis, feminist theory, and postmodernism in order to critique them.49 She subsumes radically differing theories under

48 Flax, Thinking Fragments, 230.

49 Pamela Caughie makes this argument in "Feminism and the Postmodern Turnabout" (Chicago, IL: Radical Scholars and Activist Conference, 1990).
unified rubrics. If she modified her position by saying *some* or even *most* feminist theorists think *x*, then she would not be collapsing such variant theories under a single rubric. Her tendency to over-generalize makes her work unnecessarily imprecise. For example, when she writes in her earlier text that feminist theorists are unable to fully abandon the Enlightenment self, but then in her later text she abandons this position, and seemingly embraces a thoroughly postmodern conception of gender and self, it seems as if all of feminist theory has changed, rather than just her view. She sometimes overstates the position of postmodern theory, feminist theory, and psychoanalytic theory so that she can critique it, rather than showing the ambiguities of the very opposition of these discourses.

For example, she writes in *Thinking Fragments*, "It is questionable whether any of the spaces opened by postmodernism would be comfortable to or inhabitable by those concerned with issues of gender and gender justice."\(^{50}\) This statement contradicts much of what she later writes about gender construction and justice. The point here is not that her work develops and matures; the point is that she states in all her work that it is necessary to tolerate ambiguity and to challenge totalizing discourses, yet she herself enacts both these practices repeatedly. In constructing her analysis by separating the categories

\(^{50}\)Ibid., 210.
psychoanalysis, feminism, and postmodernism, she both simplifies and rigidifies categorical thinking rather than challenging such discourses. It seems to me that by constantly referring to these three categories as separate discourses, she is constantly reenacting dichotomous thinking in a narrative that is supposed to challenge precisely such (modernist) thought.

Her separation and naming of these discourses forces one who is reading and writing about her work to separate, name and categorize theories into these various rubrics as well. It seems that what needs to be done is a genealogy of the discourses of psychoanalysis, postmodernism, and feminism that would show how these came to be constituted as separate discourses, and who and what are being served by keeping them as discreet narratives. One conclusion that would likely emerge from such an analysis is that by reinvoking the distinction between feminism and postmodernism, as well as between feminism and psychoanalysis, one furthers the Enlightenment project of marginalizing gender. I would argue that one cannot think postmodernism without challenging gender, and thus to separate the discussion of feminism and postmodernism makes it seem as if the feminist rethinking of gender is derivative of and marginal to postmodern narratives.

Flax does add an important dimension to the postmodern feminist conception of subjectivity, namely her
attentiveness to psychoanalytical insights and to the psychological well being and happiness of the subject.\textsuperscript{51} For example, it is difficult to imagine the Foucauldian subject being depressed, having friends, or being a parent. These are dimensions of subjectivity Flax herself examines. Including an analysis of these various aspects of subjectivity greatly enriches the postmodern feminist project.

Her concepts of subjectivity and of justice are also highly useful for feminist emancipatory political practice.

What follows from the claim that subjectivity is not unitary, fixed, homogeneous or teleological: it does not follow that subjectivity is an empty or outmoded category that we can happily discard along with other modern hangups. To make such a claim would be to privilege one view of subjectivity such that if it is not A it is not anything at all. It also does not follow that we can make no claims about what we believe to be better or worse ways of being a person. While we cannot fall back on reassuring, universal standards to justify our beliefs, we can, do and must make judgments about how to be with and treat ourselves and others.\textsuperscript{52}

Flax sees the analysis of subjectivity as itself a form of political intervention, a conclusion with which I completely agree.

As the lesser others of Western culture—women, people of color, the colonized—rebel, the unitary self is increasing exposed as an effect of many kinds of relations of domination. Our notions of subjectivity and our choices among them do reflect and reinforce political and social forces. In

\textsuperscript{51}See Flax, "Multiples," 40-46.

\textsuperscript{52}Ibid., 40.
this disrupted moment, the ability to tolerate and
the will to encourage fluid and multiple forms of
subjectivity is an imperative and fully ethical
position.\textsuperscript{53}

She thus concludes that rooting emancipatory struggles in
fluid, decentered, multiple subjects is not only necessary,
but just.

\textsuperscript{53}Ibid., 46.
CHAPTER FIVE

BUTLER

A major debate in contemporary social philosophy concerns the nature of subjectivity. The adherents of enlightenment philosophy conceive of subjectivity as pertaining to a unified agent acting within a horizon that is ultimately rational. Postmodern theorists on the other hand see the subject as radically fractured and decentered, constituted within a matrix of pervasive, non-rational power relations. Postmodernists such as Michel Foucault, and as we shall see, Judith Butler do not think that the subject, thought of as a unified rational agent, is desirable or even possible. They do not think that there is any interior psychic space in which can be found an ontologically grounded subject. In this chapter I will examine Butler's concept of subjectivity and consider how this is related to her idea of political praxis. I will argue that her concept of subjectivity, which conceives the subject as performative, is the conception most adequate to the project of emancipatory feminist politics. I will argue that the concept of self first articulated by Foucault as the constructed self and then developed by Butler into the performative self is the most useful for grounding an
emancipatory feminist politics. By deconstructing the ontologically grounded subject, performative theory allows for the practical and strategic enactment of various subject positions and thus provides us with the necessary tools for carrying out various emancipatory political strategies. (It insists, however, that we always examine the political implications and the exclusionary practices that this strategic employment entails.) I will argue, with Butler, that in order to successfully challenge oppressive systems we need multiple sites of intervention. The performative conception of subjectivity best allows for such political praxis.

**On the Subject of Politics**

As we have seen, Flax calls into question the necessity of grounding a theory of justice on a normative foundation that presupposes a unified rational subject. Butler asks an even deeper, more radical question: Why should we assume that politics requires any kind of stable subject? Why should we assume that there must be "a doer behind the deed?"¹

To claim that politics requires a stable subject is to claim that there can be no political

opposition to that claim. Indeed, that claim implies that a critique of the subject cannot be a politically informed critique but, rather, an act which puts into jeopardy politics as such. To require the subject means to foreclose the domain of the political, and that foreclosure, installed analytically as an essential feature of the political, enforce the boundaries of the domain of the political in such a way that enforcement is protected from political scrutiny.\(^2\)

Butler here attempts to expand the notion of the political, to extend the realm of political critique and activity to include the subject. Rather than assuming a stable subject as the ground for political activity, Butler problematizes this notion of subjectivity and includes the definition of subjectivity itself as part of her political analysis. If one assumes that politics requires a stable subject, one has in effect posited that subject as foundational to political critique, rather than including the subject position as part of the project of political critique. Rather than accepting the subject as a universal, normative grounding of politically informed critique, Butler extends the realm of politics to include a critique of the subject. She claims that the exclusion of the subject from political critique is a political move. In accepting the subject as the normative ground of political critique, one has made a move to exclude subjectivity from political scrutiny and to accept given notions of agency as normative.

It is important to note, however, that Butler is not saying that there is no subject of politics. This is the move critics of postmodernism often mistakenly assume is being made: a refusal of the grounding subject of politics automatically means a refusal or "death" of subjectivity altogether. But to make this move is to remain uncritically inscribed in the binary mode of Enlightenment rationalism. Butler does not accept such a simplistic negation.

To refuse to assume, that is, to require a notion of the subject from the start is not the same as negating or dispensing with such a notion altogether; on the contrary, it is to ask after the process of its construction and the political meaning and consequentiality of taking the subject as a requirement or presupposition of theory. 3

This is an argument similar to one Foucault makes in examining how subjectivity is constructed. Rather than assuming subjectivity as the unproblematic grounding of political theory, Butler, like Foucault, looks at the politics of subject formation. Like Foucault, Butler claims that identity is not located in an interior psychic space, but rather is a social construction. To understand the subject as a social construct, one must theorize the systems of power, among them patriarchy, within which the subject is defined. If political critique begins, implicitly or explicitly, with a concept of stable, universal "human nature," the possibility of examining the subject itself as a political construct is foreclosed. Like Foucault, Butler

3Ibid., 39.
examines the power configurations within which subjectivity is constructed. She argues that any subject position, including the unified rational agent that grounds Enlightenment philosophy, is necessarily formed within interconnecting matrixes of power based on exclusionary practices.

When theorists claim that the subject position is foundational to political theory, that it forms the normative grounding for political critique, they assume that subjectivity itself is free from power relationships. Butler, like Foucault and other postmodernists, including myself, argue that there is no foundational universal position free of power. She maintains, moreover, that this fact does not entail nihilism. She holds that power pervades the very conceptual apparatus that seeks to negotiate its terms, including the subject position of the critic; and further, that this implication of the terms of criticism in the field of power is not the advent of a nihilistic relativism incapable of furnishing norms, but, rather, the very precondition of a politically engaged critique. To establish a set of norms that are beyond power or force is itself a powerful and forceful conceptual practice that sublimes, disguises, and extends its own power play through recourse to tropes of normative universality.4

Butler here can be read as addressing Fraser and other critical theorists such as Benhabib and Habermas, as well as other Marxist and socialist theorist who are threatened by the refusal to ground social theory in a theory of the ---------------

4Ibid.
subject, and who think that attempts to deconstruct subjectivity undercuts the emancipatory potential of political theory. Butler takes a Foucauldian position, and argues that far from announcing the end of political theory and practice, the deconstruction of subjectivity allows for an expansion of politics. It is often held by some Marxists, critical theorists and others who want to ground emancipatory politics in a subject that the deconstruction of subjectivity (by holding up subjectivity to political critique) announces the end of emancipatory politics. Like Foucault and Flax, Butler argues that the refusal to ground emancipatory politics in a concept of subjectivity that is seen as grounded on universal normative ideals and is itself outside of the realm of political critique is to prematurely foreclose the viable realm of political critique, and to constrict the scope of political intervention. Like Foucault and Flax, Butler underscores the point that there is no neutral normative territory that is foundational to political critique. To assume that there is prematurely delimits the political horizon. Far from introducing nihilistic relativism, "the critique of the subject is not a negation or repudiation of the subject, but, rather, a way of interrogating its construction as a pregiven foundationalist premise."

It is the refusal to allow the subject as a

5Ibid., 42.
foundationalist premise that informs the philosophy of both Foucault and Butler. I think this refusal is necessary for any emancipatory politics to succeed, and particularly for an emancipatory feminist politics. When theorists accept the pregiven foundationalist premise of subjectivity, they accept uncritically the power configurations and relations of force that form that subject. Any theory that uncritically appropriates unexamined relationships of force and domination as the foundation of emancipatory politics cannot truly succeed in overthrowing oppressive systems, because it insists on always looking for such oppression externally, rather than disentangling the oppression from the very subjects who are being oppressed, by deconstructing and genealogizing how power and force relations form the subject.

Far from being the nihilistic threat that Fraser and others fear, Butler's critique of normative foundations represents a democratic engagement in the political field.

A social theory committed to democratic contestation within a postcolonial horizon needs to find a way to bring into question the foundations it is compelled to lay down. It is this movement of interrogating that ruse of authority that seeks to close itself off from contest that is, in my view, at the heart of any radical political project. 6

**Universality, Agency, Performativity**

It is important to note that to question, deconstruct,

6Ibid., 41.
reconfigure and resignify foundationalist categories is not to do away with them. Even "universals" have a role to play in Butler's theory, although they must be approached with suspicion.

How many "universalities" are there and to what extent is cultural conflict understandable as the clashing of a set of presumed and intransigent "universalities," a conflict which cannot be negotiated through recourse to a culturally imperialist notion of the "universal" or, rather, which will only be solved through such recourse at the cost of violence? We have, I think, witnessed the conceptual and material violence of this practice in the United States's war against Iraq, in which Arab "other" is understood to be radically "outside" the universal structures of reason and democracy and, hence, calls to be brought forcibly within.

Butler adds,

Within the political context of contemporary postcoloniality more generally, it is perhaps especially urgent to underscore the very category of the 'universal' as a site of insistent contest and resignification. Given the contested character of the term, to assume from the start a procedural or substantive notion of the universal is of necessity to impose a culturally hegemonic notion on the social field. To herald that notion then as the philosophical instrument that will negotiate between conflicts of power is precisely to safeguard and reproduce a position of hegemonic power by installing it in the metapolitical site of ultimate normativity.7

Butler insists that it is not sufficient to simply call for less culturally-constrained universals, but neither is it appropriate to abandon the concept altogether.

The term "universality" would have to be left permanently open, permanently contested,

7Ibid., 40.
permanently contingent, in order not to foreclose in advance future claims for inclusion. Indeed, from my position and from any historically constrained perspective, any totalizing concept of the universal will shut down rather than authorize the unanticipated and unanticipatable claims that will be made under the sign of "the universal." In this sense, I am not doing away with the category, but trying to relieve the category of its foundationalist weight in order to render it as a site of permanent political contest. 8

What Butler wants to do is to reconfigure the universal as a site of permanent contest, rather than to regard it as a politically neutral foundation on which to base other political contests. Once the universal becomes a contested category there is no metapolitical grounding for emancipatory politics. It is precisely in this demand to interrogate the hegemony of universal categories, among them subjectivity, that the emancipatory potential of such politics lies. This move of deconstructing hegemonic foundations radically reconfigures both the discursive terrain of politics as well as political practices. Part of this deconstruction is the politicization (through genealogical critique) of metapolitical normativity. Genealogical critique reveals that any metapolitical normative framework is always already politically constituted. While the liberatory potential of such radical disruption is great, this is a demanding task as one must always be contesting and interrogating foundations including one's own subjective position.

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8 Ibid., 40-41.
The traditional philosophical conception of political change requires not only universal principles but an agent, and this agency is necessary to ground any political theory. The postmodern move of disrupting subjectivity also reconfigures the meaning of agency. Rather than the agent being a metapolitical grounding of theory and politics, the site and construction of subjectivity is seen as a political move, and thus becomes a site of intervention. Once the subject is seen as constructed, its construction is open to contestation and reinterpretation.

Do we need to assume theoretically from the start a subject with agency before we can articulate the terms of a significant social and political task of transformation, resistance, radical democratization? If we do not offer in advance the theoretical guarantee of that agent, are we doomed to give up transformation and meaningful political practice? My suggestion is that agency belongs to a way of thinking about persons as instrumental actors who confront an external political field. But if we agree that politics and power exist already at the level at which the subject and its agency are articulated and made possible, then agency can be presumed only at the cost of refusing to inquire into its construction. Consider that 'agency' has no formal existence. 

agency is always and only a political prerogative. As such it seems crucial to question the conditions of its possibility, not to take it for granted as an a priori guarantee. 9

Here Butler addresses another of the major concerns of the critics of postmodern political theory—the idea that without a pregiven agent to effect change political intervention is not possible. Butler argues that this

9Ibid., 46-47.
conception of agency and politics is based on erroneous political assumptions, which conceal the workings of power at the level of the agent. It is a conception of agency which assumes that the subject is separate from the political field. Butler insists that there is no prepolitical foundational level in which agency exists, but rather that agency is itself is a political construction. Thus she says, "For the subject to be a pregiven point of departure for politics is to defer the question of the political construction and regulation of the subject itself." It is precisely this refusal to defer the political construction of subjectivity that informs the postmodern political project. It is because of this refusal that I see postmodern political theory as most adequate to the project of emancipatory politics. When a political theory begins by assuming agency, and then looks at how that agent can effect change in the external political field, it has already failed at the critical examination of the oppressive structures that comprise agency. One must begin a politically engaged critique at the level of subjectivity, and one must recognize the reconfiguration of the subject position as a political intervention. It is precisely such a strategy that Butler advocates:

Where are the possibilities of reworking the very matrix of power by which we are constituted, of reconstituting the legacy of that constitution,

10Ibid., 47.
and of working against each other those processes of regulation that can destabilize existing power regimes? For if the subject is constituted by power, that power does not cease at the moment the subject is constituted, for that subject is never fully constituted, but is subjected and produced time and again. That subject is neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process, one which gets detoured and stalled through other mechanisms of power, but which is power's own possibility of being reworked.\(^{11}\)

Here we encounter one of Butler's most central and significant ideas. The subject is not the metapolitical ground of politics, as Enlightenment philosophy would have it, nor is it simply a product of various political configurations, as Foucault suggests. Rather the subject is a site of resignification, reinterpretation, and reorganization of the matrixes of power. In this way Butler's concept of subjectivity breaks from the apparent determinism of the Foucauldian concept of constructed subjectivity. For Butler, the subject is not simply constituted by power, but is the active site of resignifying power relationships and of performing this reworking of power. Thus, it becomes possible to inquire as to the political implications of asserting or privileging a certain subject position over another. What are the consequences for emancipatory politics of enacting different subject positions? It is the freedom to move within and among competing interpretations of subjectivity that Butler's

\(^{11}\)Ibid.
position allows. Such movement is necessary for emancipatory politics.

Butler's concept of performativity is central to her conception of political practice. It is also her concept of agency. She introduces the concept as follows:

The term "performativity" in my usage is taken from J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things With Words* and read through Derrida's "Signature, Event, Context" in *Limited, Inc.* as well as Paul de Man's notion of "metalepsis" articulated throughout his essays on Nietzsche in *Alegories of Reading*. A performative act is one which brings into being or enacts that which it names, and so marks the constitutive or productive power of discourse. To the extent that a performative appears to "express" a prior intention, a doer behind the deed, that prior agency is only legible as the effect of that utterance. For a performative to work, it must draw upon and recite a set of linguistic conventions which have traditionally worked to bind or engage certain kinds of effects. The force or effectivity of a performative will be derived from its capacity to draw on and reencode the historicity of those conventions in a present act.12

Recall that for Austin, a performative utterance is one that, in being uttered in a certain prescribed manner, brings about a specific effect; for example, "I do take this man to be my husband," uttered during a marriage ceremony. According to Austin, "the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action."13 For Butler it is


important to note that

this power of recitation is not a function of an individual's intention, but is an effect of historically sedimented linguistic conventions. In "Signature, Event, Context," Derrida links the notion of performativity to citation and repetition: "could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open meeting, launch a ship or marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a 'citation'?" He writes further, "in such a typology, the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance." 14

As Butler emphasizes,

when words engage actions or constitute themselves a kind of action, they do this not because they reflect the power of an individual's will or intention, but because they draw upon and reengage conventions which have gained their power precisely through a sedimented iterability. The category of "intention," indeed, the notion of "the doer" will have its place, but this place will no longer be "behind" the deed as its enabling source. If the subject—a category within language and, hence, distinct from what Benhabib will call a "self"—is performatively constituted, then it follows that this will be a constitution in time, and that the "I" and the "we" will be neither fully determined by language nor radically free to instrumentalize language as an external medium. 15

Saying that a subject is performative is not abandoning any concept of agency. According to Butler it is in the

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performance that agency is constituted.

To be constituted by language is to be produced within a given network of power/discourse which is open to resignification, redeployment, subversive citation from within, and interruption and inadvertent convergences with other such networks. "Agency" is to be found precisely at such junctures where discourse is renewed.\textsuperscript{16}

We can now begin to see the political potential opened up when the subject is understood as performative. A discursive subject is always already within a network of power/discourse, but there is room to maneuver within this discursive terrain. The performative subject must be constantly reiterated, and this process of reiteration opens up a space for resignification, redeployment and subversion. The subject comes into being through this reiteration of the network of power/discourse.

If the subject is a reworking of the very discursive processes by which it is worked, then 'agency' is to be found in the possibilities of resignification opened up by discourse. In this sense, discourse is the horizon of agency, but also, performativity is to be rethought as resignification. There is no 'bidding farewell' to the doer, but only to the placement of that doer 'beyond' or 'behind' the deed.\textsuperscript{17}

The subject is only in the performance, but within this performance is room to resignify subjectivity. There is no subject position that is behind or beyond or outside of the performance, which is to say, there is no subject position behind or beyond or outside discursive practices. Any

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 135.

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid.
change, therefore, must come by disrupting those practices, so that the reiteration of the performance will reveal the normative conventions it tries to conceal. Thus Butler writes, "I would argue that there is no possibility of standing outside of the discursive conventions by which 'we' are constituted, but only the possibility of reworking the very conventions by which we are enabled."\textsuperscript{18} It is this reworking of conventions that constitutes political intervention. This is a reworking of the conventional concept of emancipatory political intervention, which begins with a concept of agency, such as women or class, and then proceeds to free that agent from oppressive power structures, such as patriarchy or capitalism. Butler's concept of the subject as performative entails that the agent is constructed through the process of political intervention; in this case political intervention is a reworking of the power/discourse matrix within which we are always embedded. Butler's concept of political intervention does not offer us the possibility of ever being "freed" from discursive systems, but only of reworking them.

The Construction and Performance of Gender

To further clarify Butler's notion of performativity, let us consider her most important application of the

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 136.
concept, its application to gender.\textsuperscript{19}

According to Butler, gender is both constructed and performative. Butler does not think that the construction of gender is somehow secondary to the construction of identity because all people come into the world embodied, and all bodies present themselves as gendered. Therefore gender is inseparable from identity, since all beings are gendered. What is necessary for feminist politics is to examine how this gendering takes place.

Considering that 'the' body is invariably transformed into his body or her body, the body is only known through its gendered appearance. It would seem imperative to consider the way in which this gendering of the body occurs. My suggestion is that the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time. From a feminist point of view, one might try to reconceive the gendered body as the legacy of sedimented acts rather than a predetermined or foreclosed structure, essence or fact, whether natural, cultural, or linguistic.\textsuperscript{20}

It is important to understand that this notion of

\textsuperscript{19}Most feminists make a distinction between sex and gender. The most common interpretation is that sex is a biological given, and gender is the cultural manifestation (or interpretation) of sex. Such an understanding, however, leaves the category of biology unexamined, and allows it to function as a metapolitical category. In Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex' (New York: Routledge, 1993) Butler problematizes the relationship of gender and sexuality by examining more closely the role of the body. Her analysis concerning the way bodies themselves are materialized, while the logical next step to her discussion of constructed gender, is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

gender as an act or a performance does not entail that there is a unified subject already in place who decides to act her gender in one way or another. Butler is not saying either that there is a subject who chooses to perform a certain gender one way one day and another way another day, as one would choose one's clothes; or that there is a true sex or gender that the performance is expressing. To say that gender is a performance is to say that it is only this repetition of acts that constitutes gender; there is nothing but the performance.

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. To expose the contingent acts that create the appearance of a naturalistic necessity, a move which has been a part of cultural critique at least since Marx, is a task that now takes on the added burden of showing how the very notion of the subject, intelligible only through its appearance as gendered, admits of possibilities that have been forcibly foreclosed by the various reifications of gender that have constituted its contingent ontologies.\textsuperscript{21}

One is always already engaged in the performance of gender by virtue of being an embodied subject in the world. The option is not to end the performance, but rather to try and maneuver within the performance. This is where the

\textsuperscript{21}Butler, Gender Trouble, 33.
emancipatory potential of performative theory is found.

It is important not to think of the performance of gender as the expression of a particular role. There is no preexisting "self" who chooses to perform gender. The performance is constitutive of the gender (and necessarily then of the self).

This distinction between expression and performativeness is quite crucial, for if gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performatively, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex, a true or abiding masculinity or femininity, are also constituted as part of the strategy by which the performative aspect of gender is concealed.

As a consequence, gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self'. . . . As a performance which is performative, gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority.22

Butler refers to the concept of a true gender identity as a regulatory fiction. This observation then can be extended to the notion of an essential self. This "essential self" is a fictitious idea that serves to regulate how we conceive of what it means to be a person. The performative model allows us to disrupt this regulatory fiction, and to examine what operations of power and oppression are involved in its creation. The very

repetition of the performance leads us to believe there is an actor behind the performance, but this is part of the regulatory fiction that Butler challenges. As she writes, "the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief." Everyone is always already performative. The possibility of political action takes place when we recognize that we are performing and manipulate and reconstitute the operations of power that go into constructing this script.

Performativity as Feminist Politics

Let me now apply the above analysis specifically to feminist emancipatory politics. Butler has addressed a standard concern many feminist theorists have regarding postmodernism.

If it is not a female subject who provides the normative model for a feminist emancipatory politics, then what does? If we fail to recuperate the subject in feminist terms, are we not depriving feminist theory of a notion of agency that casts doubt on the viability of feminist as a normative model? Without a unified concept of woman or, minimally, a family resemblance among gender-related terms, it appears that feminist politics has lost the categorical basis of its own normative claims. What constitutes the "who," the subject, for whom feminism seeks emancipation? If there is no

\[23\text{Ibid., 520.}\]
Traditionally feminist politics has been grounded in the concept of "woman" and the category of women. What happens to this category when we apply the above critique of foundationalist subject positions? Does it, as some claim, foreclose the possibility of engaging in feminist politics, if the grounding subject of women is deconstructed?

To the contrary, I would argue, with Butler, that it is precisely in deconstructing how the category of women is constructed and deconstructed that the liberatory potential of feminist theory can best be expressed. Butler's move to explicitly deconstruct the category of women (and the concept of "woman") is a move that reconceptualizes what is to count as viable political action. Traditionally political action is action that takes place external to the subject. Once the subject is reconceptualized as performative, political activity is necessarily reconceptualized as that which must take place at the level of the subject. The subject is no longer a metapolitical position. The configuration of subjectivity and the inscription of that position is seen as always already within matrices of power.

The importance of this conception shows itself when we consider the difficult question of "identity politics."

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Most emancipatory movements are grounded in identity politics. With Marx for example, it is class identity that predominates, and in much feminist theory it is the identity of women (gender) that is at the forefront.

Reconceptualizing emancipatory politics in a way that removes it from the grounding in identity necessitates a major reconfiguration of such politics.

A fundamental problem with identity politics is the rigidity of the identity categories themselves. Rather than examining the operations of power involved in constructing such identity categories as gender, race, and class, too often these categories are taken to be the metapolitical grounding of politics. (Hence the term identity politics.) A more fruitful move is to look at the relationships of power and domination that are involved in the construction of these categories. This necessarily means a reconceptualization of political praxis. Rather than being foundational to political praxis, the examination and resignification of identity categories become part of political praxis.

The political critique of the subject questions whether making a conception of identity into the ground of politics, however internally complicated, prematurely forecloses the possible cultural articulations of the subject-position that a new politics might well generate.

This kind of political position is clearly not in line with the humanist presuppositions of either feminism or related theories on the Left. At least since Marx's *Early Manuscripts*, the normative model of an integrated and unified self
has served emancipatory discourses.\textsuperscript{25}

It is the avoidance of just such premature foreclosure of the possible articulations of the subject position that I think is crucial. Part of rethinking emancipatory politics is rethinking the definition of oppression.

The feminist resistance to the critique of the subject shares some concerns with other critical and emancipatory discourses: If oppression is to be defined in terms of a loss of autonomy by the oppressed, as well as a fragmentation or alienation within the psyche of the oppressed, then a theory which insists upon the inevitable fragmentation of the subject appears to reproduce and valorize the very oppression that must be overcome. . . . [We need to] answer the question of whether oppression ought to be defined in terms of the fragmentation of identity and whether fragmentation \textit{per se} is oppressive.\textsuperscript{26}

This is one of the major points of disagreement between Marxists and many feminist thinkers on the one hand and those espousing postmodernism on the other. For Marx and for many feminists, a fragmented subject is bad. But what if the subject is \textit{inevitably} fragmented? If this is so, then oppression ought not be defined in terms of fragmentation of identity. I will argue that fragmentation \textit{per se} need not be oppressive.

The attraction of "identity" as the basis for a political movement cannot be denied. Large numbers of people can be brought together to work in the interests of their common identity. The postmodern disruption of

\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., 327-328.

\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., 327.
identity categories such as "women" and "class" makes unifying under such concepts difficult. This is played out in feminist theory in the problem of unifying under the category of women. Can feminist theory sustain itself as a political movement if the category of women is called into question? In the absence of such a unifying category, is not factionalization inevitable? Butler argues that the reverse is in fact the case:

I would argue that any effort to give universal or specific content to the category of women, presuming that that guarantee of solidarity is required in advance, will necessarily produce factionalization, and that 'identity' as a point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist political movement. Identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary.  

She does not object to employing identity categories strategically.

This is not to say that the term "women" ought not to be used, or that we ought to announce the death of the category. On the contrary, if feminism presupposes that "women" designates an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category, then the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability.  

That the subject of feminism is always and necessarily fragmented is no cause for despair. Recognizing that both individual and collective identities are unstable can give a movement strength.

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28 Ibid.
I would argue that the rifts among women over the content of the term ought to be safeguarded and prized, indeed, that this constant rifting ought to be affirmed as the ungrounded ground of feminist theory. To deconstruct the subject of feminism is not, then, to assume censure of its usage, but, on the contrary, to release the term into a future of multiple significations, to emancipate it from the maternal or racialist ontologies to which it has been restricted, and to give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear.\(^{29}\)

In other words the deconstruction of the subject is not the eradication of the subject as some would think; it is an opening up of the subject position to contestation; it is an allowance for the possibility of resignifying subjectivity by reinterpreting the ontologies within which the subject is given. It is a genealogizing of the power configurations forming the category of women, (and the concept of "woman") rather than an insistence that that category be a unifying identity uniting all feminists.

Of course, the question is inevitably raised; how do we know which resignifications are truly emancipatory? Don't we need some set of norms to adjudicate competing conceptions? Butler responds as would I:

The only answer to that question is a counter-question: who would set those norms, and what contestations would they produce? To establish a normative foundation for settling the question of what ought properly to be included in the description of women would be only and always to produce a new site of political contest. That foundation would settle nothing, but would of its own necessity founder on its own authoritarian ruse. This is not to say that there is no

\(^{29}\)Ibid.
foundation, but rather, that wherever there is one, there will also be a foundering, a contestation. That such foundations exist only to be put into question is, as it were, the permanent risk of the process of democratization. To refuse the contest is to sacrifice the radical democratic impetus of feminist politics.30

To engage in postmodern politics is risky and necessarily unsettling. This is precisely why it is so often criticized. But I think that to summarily dismiss such political engagement because it disrupts normative foundations and calls for a resignification of subjectivity is wrong. Furthermore I don't think that such politics as outlined by Butler negates large scale political movements based on more Marxian models; it just means that the founding assumptions of such movements must be open to contestation. Butler is not saying, for example that we can't invoke the category of women when discussing feminist politics; she is saying that we must recognize that this is a category which is a site of permanent resignifiability. Many people engaged in emancipatory politics want to refuse the contest which necessarily arises when the authoritarian ruse of grounding normative assumptions is brought into play, but what they do not acknowledge is that to refuse the contest, while bringing a false sense of security by providing a firm foundation, is to sacrifice the radical democratic impetus of emancipatory politics.

Given this framework, what is task of postmodern

30Ibid., 50-51.
feminist politics? According to Butler,

Obviously, the political task is not to refuse representational politics—as if one could. The juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power; hence, there is no position outside this field, but only a critical genealogy of its own legitimating practices. As such, the critical point of departure is the historical present, as Marx put it. And the task is to formulate within this constituted frame a critique of the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalize, and immobilize.\textsuperscript{31}

One of the reasons feminists often insist on the unity of the category of women is so that this category can form the foundation of a coalition which acts jointly to achieve its goals. In deconstructing the category of women, Butler reconceives coalition politics. She proposes an antifoundationalist coalition politics that does not demand a unified subject such as women on which to ground its action. Many feminist theorists insist on establishing coalition politics based on the identity of women, or at least they assume that the unified identity of the category of women as a useful premise for grounding political action. Butler challenges this assumption by asking, what kind of politics demands this concept of unity in advance? Such a feminist politics that bases itself on the concept of women does not allow for the political critique of that concept. Similarly, when a concept of coalitional politics based on unity is insisted upon, there is an implicit acceptance that

\textsuperscript{31}Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble}, 5.
solidarity is always desirable. Butler proposes, "Perhaps a coalition needs to acknowledge its contradictions and take action with those contradictions intact. Perhaps also part of what dialogic understanding entails is the acceptance of divergence, breakage, splinter, and fragmentation as part of the often tortuous process of democratization."\(^{32}\)

Butler introduces a new concept of coalition, which allows us to extricate ourselves from some of the unexamined normative categories that traditionally ground coalition politics. In allowing for a destabilized subject at the beginning of coalition politics, this antifoundational coalition politics does not cover over oppressive normative identity categories. It also does not insist on an agreement of foundational identities before action can proceed. For instance, rather than working to come to an agreement on what a woman is, and exactly who qualifies to be in this category, this antifoundational coalition politics recognizes that identity cannot be known before politically-engaged action. Moreover, when the identity of women is not assumed as a founding principle of politics, the construction of that very category can be the focus of political action.

Antifoundationalist approach to coalitional politics assumes neither that 'identity' is a premise nor that the shape or meaning of a coalitional assemblage can be known prior to its achievement. Because the articulation of an

identity within available cultural terms instates a definition that forecloses in advance the emergence of new identity concepts in and through politically engaged actions, the foundationalist tactic cannot take the transformations or expansion of existing identity concepts as a normative goal.\footnote{Ibid., 15.}

Butler's reconceptualization of the subject as constructed and performative thus necessitates her reconceptualization of political intervention and her concept of coalition and community. I think she presents a legitimate reconceptualization of coalition. I do not think she is, as some critics claim, foreclosing the possibility of coalition politics or of collective action. She is stating that the identity on which coalitions are based cannot be agreed upon in advance, since that forecloses the possibility that the coalition itself can reconfigure that identity category.

\begin{quote}
When agreed-upon identities...no longer constitute the theme or subject of politics, then identities can come into being and dissolve depending on the concrete practices that constitute them. Certain political practices institute identities on a contingent basis in order to accomplish whatever aims are in view.\footnote{Ibid., 15-16, italics mine.}
\end{quote}

Identity is not a fixed category established in advance but rather a strategic and performative position which is always already politically engaged. Antifoundational postmodern feminist politics does not try to artificially fix gender identities by demanding a unified and stable category of...
women. Rather it allows for the strategic enactment of various expressions of women depending on the specific political task being engaged.

Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time. An open coalition. . . will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purpose at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergencies and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure.35

Butler makes it clear that she is not advocating that feminist politics rid itself of subjects, rather she wants it recognized that the subject is not fixed. Feminist theories that ground themselves in essentialist concepts of subjectivity, and therefore do not allow identity to be "relinquished" are, according to this position, less effective at instigating change, because they are unable to allow for the strategic enactment of subject positions "according to the purpose at hand".

Coda: Response to Two Critics

Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser, both situating themselves in the tradition of critical theory, have raised criticisms about postmodernism generally and about Butler in particular.36 Let me conclude this chapter with a brief

35Ibid., 16.

36Benhabib is unproblematically situated within the tradition of critical theory. Fraser, on the other hand, moves between critical theory and postmodernism, and has an uneasy, often hesitant, relationship with the latter. For
summary and evaluation of this debate.\textsuperscript{37} Benhabib questions the adequacy of postmodernism as a theoretical grounding for feminist theory. She concludes that, "the postmodernist position(s) thought through to their conclusions may eliminate not only the specificity of feminist theory but place in question the very emancipatory ideal of the women's movements altogether."\textsuperscript{38}

Benhabib singles out Butler's conceptions of subjectivity and agency, and tries to show their inadequacy for emancipatory feminist politics. She wonders "how . . . the very project of female emancipation would even be thinkable without such a regulative principle of agency, autonomy, and selfhood?"\textsuperscript{39} But this is precisely the issue that Butler addresses with her concept of performativity. What Benhabib does not adequately consider is the politics of agency construction. She invokes autonomy as necessary

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{37}The debates and dialogue among Benhabib, Fraser, and Butler (as well with Drucilla Cornell) are found in Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange. The papers by Benhabib, Butler, and Fraser were first published in Praxis International 11 (July 1991).


\textsuperscript{39}Ibid., 21.
\end{flushright}
for feminist politics but does not address Butler's powerful (and I think unanswerable) criticism that autonomy is itself a politicized and regulative fiction, and that subjectivity is always constructed within the discourses of power.

Benhabib questions the emancipatory potential of a subject that is constituted by discourse, for she thinks that such a concept of subjectivity is overly deterministic. "Indeed the question is: how can one be constituted by discourse without being determined by it?" Benhabib claims that Butler's theory of performativity "presupposes a remarkably deterministic view of individuation and socialization processes which falls short of the currently available social-scientific reflections on the subject." Clearly, Benhabib fails to understand what Butler means when she speaks of the subject as constituted within discourse. Butler's theory of performativity is structured precisely to avoid the overly deterministic tenor of certain currents of postmodernism. In fact, it opens up new categories of subject formation. In response to Benhabib, Butler writes, "To be constituted by language is to be produced within a given network of power/discourse which is open to resignification, redeployment, subversive citation from

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41 Ibid.
Benhabib thinks that not only is Butler's concept of subjectivity overly deterministic, but that it does not allow for emancipatory action. She is troubled by Butler's discussion of the absence of a "doer behind the deed," and asks, "If this view of the self is adopted, is there any possibility of changing those 'expressions' which constitute us? If we are no more than the sum total of the gendered expressions we perform, is there ever any chance to stop the performance for a while, to pull the curtain down, and only let is rise if one can have a say in the production of the play itself?" Again Benhabib seems to have misunderstood Butler's position. Butler answers Benhabib as follows:

Benhabib misconstrues the theory of performativity I provide by grammatically reinstalling the subject 'behind' the deed, and by reducing the above notion of performativity to theatrical performance. . . . I would argue that there is no possibility of standing outside of the discursive conventions by which 'we' are constituted, but only the possibility of reworking the very conventions by which we are enabled. Gender performativity is not a question of instrumentally deploying a 'masquerade,' for such a construal of performativity presupposes an intentional subject behind the deed. On the contrary, gender performativity involves the difficult labor of deriving agency from the very power regimes which constitute us, and which we oppose. This is,

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42 Butler, "For A Careful Reading," 135, emphasis mine.

43 Benhabib incorrectly quotes this as the "doer beyond the deed," "Feminism and Postmodernism," 21.

44 Ibid.
oddly enough, historical work, reworking the historicity of the signifier, and no recourse to quasi-transcendental selfhood and inflated concepts of History will help us in this most concrete and paradoxical of struggles. 45

This last part of Butler's statement can be read as a response to Benhabib's questioning of the postmodern disruption of the grand narratives of history. Benhabib worries that "the 'death of history' thesis occludes the epistemological interest in history and in historical narrative which accompany the aspirations of all struggling historical actors. Once this 'interest' in recovering the lives and struggles of those 'losers' and 'victims' of history are lost, can we produce engaged feminist theory?"46 But Butler would agree that we cannot produce engaged feminist theory that does not take history into account. Butler's position, in employing genealogical critique, is necessarily and radically historical. What is at issue is not the importance of history, but rather how we conceptualize history. Does history necessarily have to be interpreted as some sort of single, unitary, objective truth as Benhabib seems to suggest, or can the interpretation and enactment of history be political in itself? Surely Butler, and postmodernists generally, are right: history does not have one meaning. The meaning(s) of history are the ones we construct, as we ourselves perform and resignify our

46 Ibid., 142.
subjectivity.

Of course, I use the grammar of an "I" or a "we" as if these subjects precede and activate their various identifications, but this is a grammatical fiction—one I am willing to use even though it runs the risk of enforcing an interpretation counter to the one that I want to make. For there is not "I" prior to its assumption of sex, and no assumption that is not at once impossible yet necessary identification. And yet, I use the grammar that denies this temporality—as I am doubtless used by it—only because I cannot find in myself a desire to replicate too closely Lacan's sometimes tortured pros (my own is difficult enough).47

Fraser, in her contribution to Feminist Contentions offers two criticisms of Butler's position: the esotericism of Butler's language, and her inadequate concept of liberation.

Fraser claims that Butler's language is anti-humanist and impersonal. She maintains that Butler uses a "self-distancing idiom" which "projects an aura of esotericism."48 Fraser asks, "Why should we use such a self-distancing idiom? What are its theoretical advantages (and disadvantages)?" But the "self" that this idiom is distancing from is the Enlightenment-humanist subject with which postmodernism takes issue. Since Butler's philosophy is a deconstruction of that subject, it is necessary to


invoke an idiom which signifies this deconstruction. The theoretical advantage, therefore, is that Butler is trying to invoke a new conception of subjectivity and to disrupt the logocentricism which informs our language. Fraser claims that Butler's idiom, "is far enough removed from our everyday ways of talking and thinking about ourselves to require some justification." Fraser seems to be missing here the very point of Butler's discussion of subjectivity, which demands that we rethink and redeploy subjectivity in a way that is radically different than our everyday way of thinking and speaking. To the charge that her language is unnecessarily esoteric Butler replies:

I would rejoin that it is probably not 'esotericism' that is at issue for Fraser, whose own language is filled with Habermasian and Frankfurt School locutions which are equally remote from 'everyday ways of talking and thinking.' Indeed, if I understand the linguistic turn of Habermas, and Fraser's shared concern with asking after 'warrants' and 'validity,' it relies on the premise that ordinary language cannot provide ultimate grounds for adjudicating the validity of its own claims (the implicit presuppositions of ordinary language need to be made explicit through a quasi-transcendental reflection which is decidedly unordinary).

Fraser is also critical of what she calls Butler's inadequate concept of liberation. Fraser thinks that feminists need utopian hope. While I would say that as a feminist I want utopian hope, I agree with Butler that any

49Ibid.

50Butler, "For A Careful Reading," 138.
invocation of utopia demands the question, "utopia for whom?" which brings us back to the problem of a grounding subject. Fraser claims that certain types of foundationalism have emancipatory effects, and that Butler, in dismissing foundationalism entirely, also forecloses the possibility of emancipation. To this Butler replies that there can be a *strategic enactment* of foundationalism. Foundationalist concepts of subjectivity can be "deployed strategically," "instituted through a subversive citation and redeployment."¹¹ Unlike Fraser's concept of a normatively grounded, fixed foundation, Butler's idea of foundation is one that "moves, and which changes in the course of that movement." Such a concept of foundation, which is open to redeployment and not fixed within a rigid prediscursive concept of normativity, seems to me more than adequate to emancipatory feminist politics.

Butler establishes a *contingent* foundation, which is guided by a *contingent* concept of normativity, as opposed to the fixed and universal concept of normativity that Fraser seems to want. Butler writes,

> It is clear that in order to set political goals, it is necessary to assert normative judgments. In a sense, my own work has been concerned to expose and ameliorate those cruelties by which subjects are produced and differentiated. . . . To this end it is crucial to rethink the domain of power-relationships, and to develop a way of adjudicating political norms without forgetting that such an adjudication will also always be a struggle of

¹¹Ibid., 141.
Like Flax, Butler reconfigures our concept of normativity (what I referred to in my Flax chapter as "non-normative ethics"). All normative judgments are part of the power/discourse matrix. There is no universal metapolitical normative as Fraser would have it. Any instigation of normativity is a political move. Just as we must act our subjectivity within contingent foundations, so too must our political practice be guided by contingent normativity. Since normative judgements are made within power/discourse matrices, they are open to critique. I agree with Butler that it is not only possible but necessary that political critique be informed by such contingent normativity.

There is no pure place outside of power by which the question of validity might be raised, and where validity is raised, it is also always an activity of power.  

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., 139.
Chapter Six

Conclusion: In Defense of Postmodernism

I have argued that the postmodern feminist theory of subjectivity and of political praxis is most useful for grounding an emancipatory feminist politics. Performative theory collapses the distinction between subjectivity and political praxis; to be a subject is always already to be politically engaged. I have argued that this thesis points to postmodern feminism's liberatory potential. There are, however, many critics of this position. Many political philosophers, among them critical theorists and Marxists, think that not only is postmodernism ineffective as an emancipatory strategy, but that it is nihilistic, simplistic, dangerous, and provides no framework from which to challenge oppression. Critics of postmodernism often employ a common rhetorical strategy, adopting a dire tone, and warning that postmodernism advocates such varied "evils" as the end of philosophy, the end of politics, the death of history, the death of the subject, and the complete rejection of such Enlightenment concepts as justice, reason, autonomy, and free will. When examined carefully, however, it is often the case that these critics of postmodernism are feeding off their own fears and their own ideas, for all too
often they have not seriously engaged any specific postmodern theorist.

In the concluding section of this dissertation I will address the concerns of two prominent Marxist critics of postmodernism, Ellen Meiksins Wood and Terry Eagleton. A recent special issue of the independent socialist journal, *Monthly Review*, entitled "In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda" features both these thinkers.¹ Both offer the most common criticisms and (I will argue) misrepresentations of the postmodern position. According to Wood (one of the editors), the main message of this issue of *Monthly Review* is to argue "that this may be just the right time to revitalize Marxist critique."² Unfortunately Wood and Eagleton attempt to substantiate this claim by delegitimizing postmodernism. Their position is that Marxism is antithetical to a still vibrant postmodernism. Consequently, both of their articles consist primarily of sustained attacks on postmodernism. I will demonstrate that their attacks are invalid.

In a sense my dissertation has come full circle. It began with Marxism, and it will end with Marxism. This is appropriate. Marxism shares with postmodern feminism a


commitment to radical social change. Like feminism it regards itself as a theory about oppression, and a movement against oppression. So the starting points of Marxism and postmodern feminism are quite similar. Most Marxists, however, view postmodernism in much the same way as do other, less radical, critics of postmodernism. Most Marxists remain firmly within the Enlightenment tradition, and hence their criticisms, represented here by Wood and Eagleton, are typical of the standard criticisms raised against the position this dissertation defends. In answering these criticisms, I am defending postmodern feminism generally and my own position in particular.

In her article "What is the 'Postmodern' Agenda? An Introduction" Ellen Meiksins Wood claims that postmodernism, among other things, is irrational, denies history, and has no theory of politics. I will address these charges in order. She begins her critique with wide-sweeping claims against postmodernism in general that are characteristically vague and unsupported by examples, textual references, or arguments.³

³It is interesting to note that nowhere in Wood's article does she mention any specific postmodernist, nor does she carefully examine any one specific postmodern concept. And her endnotes do not contain any references to postmodern texts, authors, or concepts.
longer apply and so on.4 This seems to be too strong a statement so that she can dismiss postmodernism in toto rather than carefully consider specific postmodern questions and concepts. Certainly it is not true that all or even most postmodernists would say that an epoch has ended. Wood's language belongs to those who think in terms of metanarratives.5 Postmodernists do not say that the "Enlightenment project" is dead, only that it is no longer (or never was) the primary way of thinking about our world and organizing our conceptual framework. Finally, postmodernists such as myself, Butler, and Foucault do not argue that "principles of rationality no longer apply," only that they should not be hegemonic, and that other "nonrational" and nonlinear ways of thinking also need to be given serious consideration.

Wood goes on to make the even stronger claim that postmodernism is fundamentally irrational.6 What she fails to understand is that a theory that challenges the supremacy of rationality is not necessarily fundamentally irrational. This is similar to a common misreading of the feminist project—women who challenge patriarchy are often said to be

5Foucault speaks of epochs and ages, but he contrasts the "classical period" with the modern period. Neither he nor Butler nor Flax see the contemporary period as constituting a "new epoch."
6Wood, "The 'Postmodern' Agenda," 5.
fundamentally against men. To deconstruct, critique, challenge, or redeploy X is quite different than being fundamentally against X. Deconstructing or challenging one system, such as patriarchy or rationality, does not imply one is advocating its opposite--matriarchy or irrationality. A valuable part of the postmodernism project is to deconstruct this very type of binary thinking.

Wood's next charge against postmodernism is that it denies, ignores, and is insensitive to history. In order to examine this charge, it is important to understand what Wood means by "history."

The postmodern sense of epochal novelty depends on ignoring, or denying, one overwhelming historical reality: that all the ruptures of the twentieth century have been bound together in a single historical unity of logic--and the internal contradictions--of capitalism.7

This is precisely the type of all-encompassing grand statement that postmodern feminists such as myself find so problematic. Certainly it is reasonable to claim that capitalism is an important power structure, but Wood dogmatically asserts that it is responsible for all the ruptures of the twentieth century. She then contends that because postmodernists disagree with this claim, they ignore or deny history. Certainly we disagree with this view of history, but even the most cursory reading of Foucault, for example, reveals that postmodernists do not "ignore" or

7Ibid., 4. Emphasis my own.
"deny" the claim that all history is bound together by the single historical unity of capitalism; they apply a genealogical critique and deconstruct it.  

Wood repeatedly attacks postmodernism for being insensitive to history. This is unwarranted. What is at issue is the type of historical narrative one employs. If history is thought in terms of genealogies, which are fundamentally historical, it must be acknowledged that postmodernism is deeply concerned with history. Certainly most postmodernists disagree with Wood's statement that there is a "single historical unity" bound by the logic of capitalism—if by that claim one intends to deny that there are other major historical forces operating in the modern world. Regarding this disagreement there could be an interesting debate. However, Wood forecloses the possibility of such debate by labelling the postmodern project as "remarkably insensitive to history." But what she means by "history," really, is a specific theory of history, namely historical materialism. Postmodernists challenge the idea that historical materialism is the only way to understand historical reality. I would not say postmodernists are "insensitive" to history, but rather we

8I have examined this genealogical critique in my discussion of Foucault's analysis of Marx.

9Wood, "The 'Postmodern' Agenda," 5. Pamela Caughie addressed such charges in "Feminism and the Postmodern Turnabout" (Chicago, IL: Radical Scholars and Activist Conference, 1990).
challenge this view of history and deconstruct it. Certainly this is not the same as denying history altogether.

Wood, however, does not seem to grasp this distinction. Later she adds,

Not only do we have to reject the old 'grand narratives' like Enlightenment concepts of progress, we have to give up any idea of intelligible historical process and causality, and with it, evidently, any idea of 'making history.'

Wood equates the rejection of 'grand narratives' with the rejection of history. Her contention that postmodernists have no theory of history is thus based on this important misunderstanding of postmodernism. (She cites no textual evidence to back up her interpretation.) Wood continues to equate the contestation of 'grand narratives,' and the rejection of the idea that there is a single historical unity guided by the logic of capitalism, with the denial of any history.

After concluding that postmodern theory denies history, she goes on to claim that it rules out politics as well:

In fact, 'politics' in any traditional sense of the word, having to with the overreaching power of classes or states and opposition to them, is effectively ruled out, giving way to the fractured struggles of 'identity politics' or even the

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10Ibid., emphasis my own. For an example that postmodernists do not give up on the idea of "making history" see Pamela Caughie, "Making History," in Making Feminist History: The Literary Scholarship of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, ed. William Kain (New York: Garland, 1994), 255-268.
'personal is political'... In short: a deep epistemological skepticism and a profound political defeatism.\(^{11}\)

But the issue here is whether postmodernists engage in politics or have a theory of history. If these concepts are thought of exclusively in terms of historical materialism—then no, postmodernists do not think of politics in this way or have such a theory of "history"—politics limited to examinations of the macrostructure and all-inclusive large scale revolts; history being a single historical unity guided by the logic of capitalism. This is not to say that postmodernists reject out of hand such concepts of politics and history. It means that these concepts of "politics" and "history" are not the only useful ones for guiding emancipatory praxis. We may avail ourselves of Wood's views of politics and of history, but at the same time we must seriously consider other interpretations of what is meant by "politics" and "history." Wood seems unable to think in these terms. The way she has laid out her discussion, it is either Wood's view of history, or we have no theory of history; her view of politics or we have no politics.

Wood has forced an artificial delimitation of the political field by insisting that we choose between either postmodernism or historical materialism. Postmodern theory, on the other hand, allows us to engage in political critique and praxis without making such a choice. While Wood finds

\(^{11}\)Ibid., 9.
it necessary to delegitimate postmodernism in order to claim the superiority and necessity of Marxism, what I have argued for is the need to employ both various postmodern concepts of history and politics as well as socialist/Marxist ones. Rather than a wholesale rejection of Marxism, what is called for is a strategic deployment of non-hegemonic Marxian concepts.¹²

We do need a way to think together the macrostructure and the microstructure; we do need a way to conceptualize and resist large systems such as capitalism and patriarchy, but we must not privilege these larger struggles and dismiss the validity of local struggles and performative acts. In other words we need to be rigorously engaged in renegotiating power within these larger matrices of domination, while at the same time conceptualizing and working towards large scale changes.

Wood seems to assume that there is a fundamental dichotomy between structures and causes on the one hand, and fragments and contingencies on the other. She then assigns the former to historical materialism, and consigns the latter exclusively to the domain of postmodernism.

Current theories of postmodernity... effectively

deny the very existence of structures or structural connections and the very possibility of 'causal analysis.' Structures and causes have been replaced by fragments and contingencies. There is no such thing as a social system (e.g., the capitalist system) with its own different kinds of power, oppression, identity, and discourse.¹³

Even the most cursory reading of, for example Foucault or Butler, reveals that a major issue examined by postmodern theorist is structure. Why should one assume that "structures and causes" and "fragments and contingencies" are mutually exclusive? It is not either "structures and causes" or "fragments and contingencies" but both. It is in thinking of them together that emancipation lies, not in arguing for their opposition, as does Wood. I think, therefore, that useful political philosophy begins when we acknowledge that we always have both, simultaneously. The question ought not to be which is more important--structures and causes or fragments and contingencies. Rather, the important question is: How do we engage in useful political philosophy aimed at emancipatory strategies when we have both structures and causes as well as fragments and contingencies? (We must examine, for instance, how to think together a social system such as capitalism and selves structured performatively.) If one maintains a rigid opposition, the philosopher's task becomes one of arguing for one position over the other as opposed to trying to

think of them both together. My whole project is one of learning to think of structures and causes together with fragments and contingencies, rather than, as Wood does, reifying their opposition for the sake of proving that one is better than the other.

Wood ends her article by quoting from the letter she sent out requesting articles for this issue of the Monthly Review. In it she wrote, "We are proposing a collection of articles that will offer some suggestions about how historical materialism can deal with that other agenda in more fruitful, forceful, and liberating ways than the current intellectual and political fashions are able to do. . . . Part of the object is to demonstrate that our terrain is where it's at." If the point is to prove that historical materialism is better than postmodernism, then one ought to lay out both theories carefully, and then make the case for one or the other. Wood, however, does a broad-stroke misreading of the postmodern project, creating instead a "postmodern" strawperson, which she can knock down in favor of historical materialism.

I agree with Wood that this is a time to revitalize Marxist critique. However, as I have argued, I think postmodernism does not exclude such a revitalization. In framing the issue—Marxism versus postmodernism—Wood misses an opportunity to explore the differences between Marxism

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14 Ibid., 12.
and postmodernism, and to examine possible ways to think these discourses together, as well as point out places in which they are irreconcilably different. Rather than establishing a theoretical framework for an emancipatory political praxis, she seems more concerned with proving that she (and all historical materialists) are right and, conversely, that all postmodernists are wrong. However, to state that postmodern theory is fundamentally irrational, deny that it has a theory of history, and claim that it lacks a politics, is to completely misunderstand postmodernism.

In "Where Do Postmodernists Come From?" Terry Eagleton also attacks postmodernism in an attempt to valorize Marxism. He begins his article with a rhetorical ploy:

Imagine a radical movement that had suffered an emphatic defeat. So emphatic, in fact, that it seemed unlikely to resurface for the length of a lifetime, if at all. As time wore on, the beliefs of this movement might begin to seem less false or ineffectual than simply irrelevant. . . . Radicals might come to find themselves less overwhelmed or out-argued than simply washed up, speaking a language so quaintly out of tune with their era that, as with the language of Platonism or courtly love, nobody even bothered any longer to ask whether it was true. What would be the likely response of the left to such a dire condition? 15

Thus begins Eagleton's story of how postmodernism comes about in the wake of Marxism's ebbing hegemony. While clever, this ploy enables Eagleton to hide behind

15 Eagleton, "Where Do Postmodernists Come From?" 59.
conjecture. He provides no arguments, citations, examples, or specifics to support his unequivocally harsh attack on postmodernism. Like Wood, he does not carefully examine any specific postmodern concept, nor does he refer to any specific postmodern theorist. And like Wood, the "postmodernism" Eagleton disputes is one of his own invention. Among his many charges against postmodernism, Eagleton accuses postmodernism of being a naive celebration of otherness, lacking rigor, having no political commitment, presenting an impoverished view of subjectivity, and finally, of denying macrostructure and focusing only on microstructure. Let us examine these accusations.

According to Eagleton, postmodernism, "thinks in the rigid opposition of 'inside' and outside,' where to be on the inside is to be complicit and to be on the outside is to be impotent."\(^{16}\) According to Eagleton, it is this inside/outside opposition that leads postmodernists to celebrate "otherness."

The only genuine criticism could be one launched from outside the system altogether; and one would expect, therefore, a certain fetishizing of 'otherness'. . . . There would be enormous interest in anything that seemed alien, deviant, exotic, unincorporable, all the way from aardvarks to Alpha Centuri, a passion for whatever gave us a tantalizing glimpse of something beyond the logic of the system.\(^{17}\)

It is precisely such inside/outside dichotomies,

\(^{16}\)Ibid., 61.

\(^{17}\)Ibid., 61.
however, that postmodernism *deconstructs*. As we have seen, according to postmodern theory one can never get "outside the system altogether." What Eagleton calls the "fetishizing of 'otherness'" is actually internal to a discourse inclusion of marginalized discourses and voices in an attempt to challenge the structure of inside/outside. He sees this as a "fetishizing" because he thinks in terms of either/or. In his misunderstanding of the postmodern project, we are either inside or outside the system, therefore he claims that postmodernists reject the system; we either reject and ignore the 'other' or we have a fetishizing of 'otherness.' In attributing this binary construction to postmodern theory, Eagleton's argument demonstrates a serious misunderstanding of one of its basic tenents.

Ironically, while Eagleton himself demonstrates an inability to grasp the subtleties and complexities of postmodern theory, he accuses postmodernists of being the ones who are unable to engage in rigorous analysis:

> Grasping a complex totality involves some rigorous analysis; so it is not surprising that such strenuously systematic thought should be out of fashion, dismissed as phallic, scientistic, or what have you.¹⁸

Here Eagleton snidely suggests that postmodernists who are critical of metanarratives, phallogocentrism, and scientism are simply too lackadaisical to engage in rigorous

¹⁸Ibid., 63.
analysis. It is, of course, much easier for Eagleton to dismiss the complex discussions within postmodern theory of such issues as the phallic nature of discourse and the privileging of science, than it is for him to argue why such postmodern analysis is unnecessary, or prove that it is incorrect.

Not only does Eagleton accuse postmodernists of being theoretically weak, but he also accuses us of being politically indifferent.

When there is nothing in particular in it for you to find out how you stand--if you are a professor in Ithaca or Irvine, for example--you can afford to be ambiguous, elusive, deliciously indeterminate.¹⁹

This statement is insulting to postmodern feminists such as myself. Eagleton implies that postmodernists are not fighting for our lives but only engaging in some amusing academic game. This type of unsupported and disparaging remark I find appalling. Eagleton carelessly implies that postmodern feminists who argue for the efficacy of ambiguity, or the political necessity of indeterminacy are not expressing deeply held political convictions. He accuses postmodernists of playing a "delicious" academic game, snidely claiming the moral and intellectual high-ground, without seriously addressing any of the real issues at stake.

He continues in this vein,

¹⁹Ibid.
Cognitive and realist accounts of human consciousness would yield ground to various kinds of pragmatism and relativism, partly because there didn't any longer seem much politically at stake in knowing how it stood with you.\textsuperscript{20}

I argue for pragmatism and relativism because there is everything politically at stake in knowing how it stands with me. Unlike Eagleton--a white male safely ensconced in the academic hierarchy with connections in the "good old boys" network--who can self-righteously claim, without argument or justification, that his way is the best, (why he feels the need to do this is itself an issue postmodern feminism addresses) I feel a certain degree of urgency to open up the political terrain to the other, which in many cases is myself. Eagleton, however, would claim that I think he is smug simply because I am attracted, like a moth to light, to the "hair-raisingly avant garde."

And what would also gradually implode, along with reasonably certain knowledge, would be the idea of a human subject "centered" and unified enough to take significant action. For such significant action would now seem in short supply; and the result, once more, would be to make a virtue out of necessity by singing the praises of the diffuse, decentered, schizoid human subject--a subject who might well not be 'together' enough to topple a bottle off a wall, let alone bring down the state, but who could nevertheless be presented as hair-raisingly avant garde in contrast to the smugly centered subjects of an older, more classical phase of capitalism.\textsuperscript{21}

Eagleton presents the postmodern account of

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid.
subjectivity in an absurdly naive way, and then he attacks it. Of course he gives us this skewed and truncated account of the postmodern subject so that he can easily topple this strawperson and claim that his way is the only way. He implies that the postmodern account of subjectivity, rather than being the well reasoned and complex account that it is, is just a nonchalant effort by theoretically inept postmodernists to make a virtue out of a necessity.

Eagleton repeats this theme of "making a virtue out of a necessity" when he discusses marcropolitics versus micropolitics.

If no very ambitious form of political action seems for the moment possible, if so-called micropolitics seem the order of the day, it is always tempting to convert this necessity into a virtue— to console oneself with the thought that one's political limitations have a kind of objective ground in reality, in the fact that social 'totality' is in any case just an illusion. . . . It does not matter if there is no political agent at hand to transform the whole, because there is in fact no whole to be transformed. 22

Eagleton makes the false assumption that it is either "ambitious form of political action" (he is obviously alluding to revolution here in his annoyingly vague and coy manner) or micropolitics. With this polemical construction of the problematic, Eagleton misses the chance to discuss seriously how we can engage in effective emancipatory politics employing both macropolitics and micropolitics. Instead he insists that we must choose between micropolitics.

22 Ibid., 62.
and macropolitics, a choice postmodern theory claims cannot and should not be made.

After claiming that postmodernism fetishizes the other, lacks political commitment, has an inadequate theory of subjectivity and is unable to theorize the macrostructure, Eagleton applies this description of postmodernism to judge its efficacy in challenging capitalism. There are several things wrong with his analysis, two of which I will mention here. The first is that the "postmodernism" he has outlined is so vague, misleading and bereft of depth that it is impossible to apply it to the critique of capitalism. And this is yet another place where Eagleton misses the opportunity to advance political theory and contribute to a useful dialogue between postmodernism and Marxism. The question he should be examining is: How can a particular postmodern analysis, such as Butler's or Foucault's, be applied specifically to the critique of capitalism? His way of course is much easier.

The second problem with his analysis is that he misses the significant postmodern point that capitalism is not the only, nor necessarily the most important, structural system of domination. He is, for example, ignoring much of the feminist concern with gender when he writes,

One might predict in this period a quickening of interest in psychoanalysis—for psychoanalysis is not only the thinking person's sensationalism, blending intellectual rigor with the most lurid materials, but it exudes a general exciting air of radicalism without being particularly so
politically. If the more abstract questions of state, mode of production, and civil society seems for the moment too hard to resolve, then one might shift one's political attention to something more intimate and immediate, more living and fleshy, like the body.\(^{23}\)

The last part of this statement in particular is an affront to almost all feminist theorists in general, and certainly to postmodern feminists in particular. Eagleton insinuates that those of us who choose not to privilege the abstract questions of state, mode of production, etc., do this because they are "too hard to resolve." Maybe we do this because we think there are other equally important issues to address, such as gender. "Living and fleshy" things like the gendered body are unimportant to Eagleton so he assumes that those of us who analyze these issues are simply not up to the task of engaging in "real" analysis about "important" things.

Eagleton does reluctantly concede that postmodernists offer an analysis of gender and ethnicity, but he quickly adds that this is at the expense of missing the "real" issues.

These valuable preoccupations have also often shown a signal indifference to that power which is the invisible color of daily life, which determines our existence—sometimes literally so—in almost every quarter, which decides in large measure the destiny of nations and the internecine conflicts between them. It is as though every other form of oppressive power can be readily debated, but not the one which so often sets the long-term agenda for them or is at the very least

\(^{23}\)Ibid., 65.
implicated with them at their core. The power of capital is now so wearily familiar that even large sectors of the left have succeeded in naturalizing it, taking it for granted as an immutable structure."\textsuperscript{24}

The issue here is simple--rather than arguing that fighting capitalism is more important than fighting, for example patriarchy and racism, rather than trying to prove (in a blustery tirade of self-righteous verbiage) that the power of capital is the ultimate determiner of our existence, I maintain--and have argued--that for emancipatory political philosophy to move forward, we must accept that we are constructed within multiple power dynamics. I contend that there are multiple forces within which we are constructed (not determined), and by focusing on overthrowing a single force such as capitalism, we will not succeed in achieving liberation.

While Eagleton insinuates that postmodernist, I do this for kicks (or because they are too lazy or stupid to think about "real" things such as the state) in fact I engage in political philosophy to save my life, and this project entails engaging the fight on many levels at once, not wasting valuable time and energy proving one way is better than another. While Eagleton marks time attacking the legitimacy of (his view of) postmodernism as a viable emancipatory practice, and while he is busy declaring that the only thing worth fighting is the power of capital--

\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., 67-68, emphasis my own.
fascism may well be approaching. According to Eagleton, however, as a postmodernist I should not even be able to see the problem with fascism.

In pulling the rug out from under the certainties of its political opponents, this postmodern culture has often enough pulled it out from under itself too, leaving itself with no more reason why we should resist fascism than the feebly pragmatic plea that fascism is not the way we do things in Sussex or Sacramento.\textsuperscript{25}

Both Eagleton and Wood, like many Marxist critics of postmodernism, are primarily concerned with establishing the hegemony of historical materialism (and conversely with delegitimating postmodernism). However, postmodernism, according to their descriptions, has become so vague and amorphous as to be rendered a meaningless term that stands for whatever they need it to mean at any particular time—the ever ready strawperson. Battling this amorphous strawperson then becomes their overriding theoretical and political project. In my view, one of the most important contributions of postmodern theory to political philosophy is precisely that it challenges this either/or construction presented by both Wood and Eagleton. Postmodernism, as I have shown, allows us to employ multiple strategies of political intervention, rather than engage in a hollow academic debate that attempts to establish the hegemony of a single strategy, while proving definitively the illegitimacy of any other.

\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., 68.


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Leacock, Eleanor Burke. Introduction to *The Origin of the*


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The dissertation is, therefore, accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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