To be a Marxist in a humanities department at an American university these days is an anomalous situation. On the one hand, the climate is in some ways more favorable to radical forms of cultural analysis than has been the case at any other time since the 1930s. The terms "politics" and "ideology" appear almost routinely in the titles of books, articles, and academic panels that discuss literary and cultural matters. Professors calling themselves "Marxists" are cropping up in many humanities departments, and the cash bar sponsored by the Marxist Literary Group has been for several years now one of the largest and loudest events at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association. An emerging generation of "canon-busting" scholars is exploring culture as a field defined largely by intersecting discourses of race, gender, and class; indeed, the 1988 convention of the American Studies Association devoted its entire program to these issues. Even the threat posed by William Bennett, Allan Bloom, and the recently formed conservative consortium calling itself the National Association of Scholars—while potentially destructive of the as-
yet fragile achievements of the canon-busting scholars whom they term the “barbarians in our midst”—is serving, at least at present, to confirm a sense of solidarity and purpose among the new academic leftists. The radical critique of culture may not constitute a new orthodoxy, but it appears to enjoy a comfortable legitimacy.¹

On the other hand, the precise standing of Marxism within this emergent academic radicalism is, in my view, somewhat ambiguous, for accompanying the energetic renewal of attention to the categories of Marxist analysis has been an equally fervent demand that these categories be revised. Indeed, the setting in which a version of this paper was originally delivered was an academic conference at the University of Pennsylvania that originally bore the name “Revising Marx,” and the epigraph on the conference call contained the following unattributed statement: “Until now the philosophers have interpreted Marx; the point, however, is to change him.” While it is certainly significant that the various humanities departments at the University of Pennsylvania sponsored a conference devoted entirely to Marxist literary theory, it is also noteworthy that the text framing the discourse of the entire conference unmistakably conveyed the assumption that it is indeed desirable and necessary to “revise” or “change” Marx.

As is well known by anyone familiar with the rhetoric of Marxist debate, the term “revisionist” is one of the most scurrilous terms one can use to castigate an opponent for class collaborationism and abandonment of revolutionary strategy. Lenin used it relentlessly against Edward Bernstein, the evolutionary socialist of the Second International; it was the principal term of opprobrium used against “capitalist-roaders” during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The fact that it persists even today in the rhetoric of the leaders of the USSR and the People’s Republic of China (PRC)—though, given recent developments, its days may be numbered—reveals, if only by irony, its continuing importance to the Marxist heritage. At the outset of this discussion, then, I announce my skepticism: if we change Marx, are we going to be able—as Marx urged in the famous Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach echoed in the conference epigraph—to change the world?²

¹. See the Chronicle of Higher Education, November 30 and December 7, 1988.
Now, the writings of Marx, Engels, and other theorists in the Marxist-Leninist tradition do not constitute a holy text, and Marx himself is well known to have declared, “I am not a Marxist.” As I shall indicate in this essay, there are significant arenas within Marxism that urgently require retheorization on the basis of twentieth-century historical experience. Nonetheless, one alters a theory only if it is found wanting, and in determining whether a theory is deficient one’s first responsibility is to see whether the theory is itself capable of accounting for apparent anomalies arising in the course of its application. Further, one must decide whether the needed revisions are so extensive as to necessitate jettisoning the original theory, or whether they constitute what Hilary Putnam would call “auxiliary hypotheses,” that is, propositions which corroborate the central premises of a theory while requiring certain adjustments to account for changed circumstances or newly discovered evidence. As I shall argue here, much of the current talk about changing Marx does not adopt such a logical approach to the nature of theory and the problem of theory change, nor does it—frequently even when it calls itself “Marxist”—issue from within the understandings and commitments of Marxism itself. At times this revisionary discourse smacks of the compulsive searching for novelty—new products, new ideas—endemic to the peculiar forms taken by consumerism and careerism in the liberal university. At times, still more seri-

that “[w]hatever the subsequent vicissitudes of the struggle may be, however many partial zigzags it may be necessary to overcome . . . in order not to get lost in these twists, in order not to get lost in the periods of retreat, retirement or temporary defeat, or when history, or the enemy, throws us back—in my opinion the important and the only theoretically correct thing is not to cast out the old programme” (“Report on Revising the Programme and Name of the Party” [March 8, 1918], Selected Works [Moscow: Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the USSR, 1934], 8: 315). Stanley Aronowitz, however, attaches to his long essay “The Crisis in Historical Materialism” the following epigraph: “Theorists have interpreted Marxism in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” (The Crisis in Historical Materialism: Class, Politics and Culture in Marxist Theory [New York: Praeger, 1981], 1). The conference at the University of Pennsylvania on “Revising Marx” took place in December of 1987. I wish to thank Michael Sprinker, Michael Holquist, and Gayatri Spivak for their rigorous and very useful responses to the first version of this paper. Rodney Green and David Hoddeson also provided many helpful criticisms.

ously, this revisionary discourse, "Marxist" as it may claim to be, suggests, as I shall argue, a covert endorsement of certain anti-Marxist assumptions enjoying widespread currency in the university and the society as a whole.

It shall be my contention in the first part of this paper that the great preponderance of the retheorizing of Marxism going on today under the aegis of poststructuralism constitutes a departure from—indeed, an attack upon—those cardinal principles of Marxism that distinguish it as a science of historical development and a strategy for revolutionary change. I shall also concede, however, that this revisionary activity addresses some crucial anomalies—some apparent, some real—in traditional Marxist theory and thus offers some salutary challenges to Marxist theory and practice to revitalize themselves in a critical historical period. In the second part of this paper, I shall present what I consider to be the most significant of these challenges. Since the most vocal—and, in my view, the most compelling—of the recent theoretical ripostes to Marxism comes from feminist theory, I shall devote the final pages of this essay to a consideration of gender and class within the framework of dialectics. Although I clearly cannot devote to any of these matters the sort of close theoretical and historical attention that each of them deserves, I hope to indicate the lines along which fruitful work is currently being done and additional work remains to be done. My goal in this essay is thus to issue a polemic and to outline an investigative terrain. I should also note that throughout this discussion I shall assume a concept of the "political" somewhat broader than is common in the discourse of literary and other cultural scholars. But if at times I venture into somewhat unfamiliar areas of theoretical and historical inquiry, I nonetheless urge humanistic colleagues to stay with me. Issues of language, representation, and textuality central to the enterprise of literary and cultural criticism are, in my view, intimately bound up with the sorts of debates I shall be confronting. If we seek to understand the many ways in which the "political" is inscribed within the textual, we must also take into account its various inscriptions—theoretical and historical—within the economic.

Before I go on to analyze the main lines of the poststructuralist critique of Marxism, let me set forth what I see as being the principal historical developments that have generated this cri-
tique and furnish the grounds for its appeal. First, and most im-
portant, is the collapse of the two major twentieth-century move-
ments to consolidate socialism and move toward communism in
the PRC and the USSR. Whether one construes these countries
and their global allies as "state socialist" or "state capitalist," their
present social organization is cause for dismay. For many,
therefore—not just latter-day poststructuralists—the trajectory of
these countries' development in past decades has called into ques-
tion any number of the analytical paradigms that form the basis of
Marxism's claim to status as a "master discourse" of historical
change—from the base/superstructure relation to the analysis of
successive modes of production, from the validity of materialist
dialectics to the feasibility and necessity of communism. Second,
the current absence of significant leftist leadership in the
working-class movement in advanced, industrial, capitalist coun-
tries, compounded with the phenomenon of Eurocommunism,
has called into question the central historical role Marxism has
traditionally attributed to the proletariat, prompting some to re-
define the working class in various (non-Marxist) ways and others
to abandon the working class altogether as the principal agent of
social transformation. Third, the rise of various oppositional
movements apparently unrelated to social class (feminism, ecolog-
ical protests, activities for nuclear disarmament) would seem to
confirm this need for a shift in focus. Perhaps, it is argued, the
problem of historical agency has more to do with subject positions
defined according to a range of moral and ideological imperatives
than with a social group's relation to material production. The
answers that poststructuralism has proposed to account for this
crisis in Marxism may be, as I shall suggest, largely specious, but
there is no doubt that a crisis exists and that Marxism itself must
come up with some satisfactory answers if it is widely to regain its
credibility as a critical theory and its viability as a revolutionary
practice that can shape and transform an oppressive social reality.

I

Poststructuralism begins its assault on Marxism by accusing it
of "scientism." In its ambition to offer a "metatheory" of historical
change through its dogma of historical materialism, the argument goes, Marxism proposes a metaphysics. Indeed, its pretension to the status of a totalizing “master discourse” is a gesture of domination, coercive and even terroristic, that renders Marxism as dangerous as the bourgeois hegemony to which it apparently sets itself in opposition. Marxism’s alleged attempt to subordinate the multiplicity, particularity, free play, and contingency of concrete lived experience to the reductionist and abstract necessity of the dialectic results in either the cannibalization or the exclusion of difference. By contrast, poststructuralism would have us realize that any move to theorize social development must begin with a commitment to the refusal of mastery and a recognition of the irreducibly contingent; any other premise condemns the theorist to repeating the sins of the fathers of Western metaphysics.\(^4\)

There are a number of ways in which Marxists might respond to the poststructuralist charge of “scientism”; two strike me as particularly important. First, it is important to note that the above characterization of Marxism as wedded to the notion of a mechanistic dialectic, chewing up any unassimilable accidents that cross its path as it slouches toward its historical apotheosis, is, to say the least, something of a straw man. Marx (and Lenin and Mao, for that matter) had a powerful sense of the multiple determinants producing the zigzag course of actual class struggle, and Marx’s use of dialectics to analyze a vast range of social and historical phenomena indicates an immensely sophisticated awareness of the difference between dialectical laws and dialectical categories, dialectical ontology and dialectical epistemology. Marxism never posits that the dialectic *causes* things to happen; nor does it make the claim, as Stanley Aronowitz charges, that the class contradiction is the only contradiction in social development. It only asserts that, in class society, this contradiction assumes primacy in determining the form in which other contradictions will work themselves out. I shall remark further on Marxist dialectics later,

as well as on the primacy of the class contradiction; suffice it to acknowledge at this point that the poststructuralist refutation of the scientific claims of Marxism frequently rests upon a serious distortion of the nature of Marxism's claim to explanatory status.\(^5\)

Second, I would note that the poststructuralist claim to have preserved a space for difference is not as free from dominant ideology—or from a subtle sort of coercion—as it might first appear, despite its pietistic posture of respect for the marginal and excluded. For to assert the supremacy of the contingent over the necessary, the concrete over the abstract, the particular over the general, and to eschew the totalizing claims of theory, is not an ideologically innocent position: it has a long—and ignoble—history in the annals of Western empiricism, a history that hardly guarantees the proponent of this position exemption from hegemonic relations of power. The apparently tough-minded pragmatism that asserts only the concrete to be real also restricts itself to the reality of the here and now: the seeming courageousness of immersing oneself in the contingency and randomness of a history without laws slides easily into an acceptance—sometimes cynical, sometimes complacent—of the history that others make for us. If the opposition to hegemony is restricted to pockets of resistance, it is easily enough pocketed. And while the refusal of mastery sounds like a noble enough gesture, it smacks of a certain noblesse oblige, if not political opportunism. Academic theorists occupying relatively secure and elite positions may quite understandably wish to dissociate themselves from the false totalizations that it is, by and large, the function of the academy to disseminate. But it is questionable whether any social group that struggles for freedom from subordination or exploitation would so readily—and formalistically—conflate the “master discourse” which rationalizes oppression with one that enables emancipation.\(^6\)

Closely related to the poststructuralist rejection of Marxism's


6. Within feminism, Sheila Rowbotham's attack on Marxism-Leninism's centralism and determinacy (Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Social-
scientism is its attack upon a primary component of historical materialism—namely, the centrality of a class analysis of historical development and the attribution of a primary revolutionary role to the working class. This attack on Marxism's insistence upon the primacy of class—which Ernesto Laclau terms the "Platonic cave of class reductionism"—takes a variety of forms. Some theorists, basing their discussion of class on an analysis of the particularities of the "postindustrial society" that has presumably superseded the industrial society analyzed by Marx, argue that the nature of capital has changed. "Cultural capital" is apparently supplanting industrial capital: since the principal force of production is now information, the relative positions of classes in the relations of production have altered accordingly. Elaborating upon the notion of a "new working class" popular among certain elements of the New Left in the 1960s, theorists such as Alvin Gouldner claim that the proletariat has been displaced as the potentially revolutionary class by a new class of intellectuals who have a far greater interest in—and ability to practice—self-management. In a variant of this position, certain "new working class" theorists argue that the traditional working class has not disappeared but that it should enter into alliance with other social groups by suppressing its specifically class interests and stressing the extent to which its needs correspond with those of society as a whole.⁷

Other theorists hostile to the traditional Marxist emphasis upon the working class claim that classes are constituted not by their relation to production but rather by their historical experi-

ence. It is merely evidence of what Baudrillard calls the "productivist bias" of Marxism, then, to assert that relations of production have a determining influence on historical development because they position groups of people in such a way as to establish objective class interests. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, taking an extreme version of this position, argue that there are no class interests at all prior to the articulation of these interests in discourse; there are no potential historical agents—only actual agents—who establish their centrality to the political process by taking an articulate part in that process. Arthur Brittan and Mary Maynard, in a moderated variant of this view, hold that class remains an important category of analysis but can no longer lay claim to being a "primary" locus of causality. Exploitation may lie at the base of class oppression, but other forms of oppression—specifically, those of gender and race—have qualitatively different roots—power relations within the family, objectification—that cannot be "reduced" to economic imperatives. According to either the "soft" or the "hard" version of this argument, however, the working class is effectively displaced from its central historical role. Either it becomes a part (usually a subordinate one) of what Terry Eagleton calls the "contemporary Holy Trinity of class, gender and race," at most playing a marginal role in a politics of alliance among groups whose relation to one another is atomistic and purely conjunctural, or it disappears altogether as a progressive historical force, its traditional role being played out by other social groups—women, racial minorities, the "underclass" or "outgroup"—who articulate a more self-conscious politics of opposition than is signaled by routine working-class demands for maintaining or gaining economic benefits.

An entire Marxist sociology can be adduced to refute the above arguments; Ellen Meiksins Woods's excellent book The Retreat from Class: A New "True" Socialism is probably the best single

9. Eagleton, Against the Grain, 82.
source on this subject. In this context I shall confine myself to four brief points. First, the above analyses tend to evade the most important facet of Marx's discussion of the history-making role of the proletariat—namely, its status as an exploited class, exclusively positioned as the agent to abolish classes by virtue of its being the only social group that needs to abolish class hierarchy as such. In the industrialized countries of the present era, to be sure, the definition of the working class should include large numbers of service and white-collar workers who, while producing surplus value, do not produce commodities in the traditional Marxist sense; it should also include the unemployed. But to expand the definition of the working class is not to deny that it possesses distinct needs and imperatives, and that these necessarily run counter to the needs and imperatives of other classes—or, at least, of the bourgeoisie. To assign the working class the role of leading a movement that includes all right-thinking people (presumably opposed to nuclear holocaust, ecological destruction, etc.) but denies the working class's status as an exploited class, one that must accomplish its own self-abolition to achieve its emancipation, is to divest the notion of a working class of any determinate content and to make the fight for social justice a matter of sentimental utopianism—a new "true" socialism indeed, as Woods points out.

Second, there is a curious Eurocentrism in the notion that the "new working class" consists to any significant extent of information experts and white-collar professionals. To be sure, the increasingly international division of labor has resulted in the assignment of increasingly important roles to groups capable of administering the complex new technologies. But what this division of labor also means is that vast numbers of newly proletarianized peoples of color have been drawn into the imperialist orbit. Rather than judge that the world now lives in a "postindustrial society," why not designate these people as the "new working class"? Poststructuralism's antipathy to global totality, its tendency to view the non-Western world as irretrievably—if heroically—marginal, I hypothesize, makes it impervious to such connections, and leads it to assign an inflated historical role to a segment of the

Western work force—information experts—that is highly unlikely to play a vanguard role in any movement for far-reaching social change.

Third, as regards this question of the constitution of the working class even in the industrialized countries, it is important to be aware that the notion of the working class as guiding a good deal of the poststructuralist critique of Marxism is subtly racist and sexist, insofar as it suggests that women and racial minorities are only conjuncturally related to the working class, if at all, and that, if they do work, this fact is less crucial in establishing their identities than is the case with white males. While I do not want to make the case that gender and race oppression are wholly reducible to class, I would point out that, at best, this separation of gender and race from class draws attention away from the crucially important ways in which women and peoples of color provide capitalism with its superexploited labor pools. Moreover, I would note that, at worst, this separation can, however unintentionally, entail an accession to certain noxious mythologies of “welfare capitalism” which would portray unemployed peoples of color and female heads of single-parent households as an underclass on the fringes of capitalist production, collecting welfare benefits paid for by the employed and sharing no common needs and goals with the working class as a whole.11

Fourth, it is crucial to refute the notion that the working class can be constituted as a class and possess distinctive social interests only if it self-consciously defines itself in class terms and, moreover, articulates a class-based rhetoric of opposition. Such theorizing collapses any distinction between the actual and the potential, the text of social relations and the text of political discourse. Certain poststructuralist theorists, reacting to the currently low level of articulated class consciousness among the proletariat in advanced industrial nations, posit that this signifies the disappearance of the working class’s history-making role. Yet these theorists would, I am sure, be reluctant to conclude that the vast majority of slaves who never articulated an oppositional political

11. Aronowitz, indeed, argues that “certain strata of the working class are situated in places that make them inherently antagonistic to the interests of the underclasses” (Crisis in Historical Materialism, 98).
stance did not possess an "objective" interest in their emancipation—an interest shaped, moreover, most emphatically by their relation to production. While theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe are surely correct in pointing out that objective class position does not in and of itself make for revolutionary subjectivity—a point that Marxists readily concede—their rejection of any "interest" that might exist prior to its expression has the effect of hyper-
"textualizing" people's actual place in existing social relations. Presumably, a subject position is "real" only if it achieves (verbal) ideological expression.

As a result of its rejection of scientism and its deemphasis on (or reformulation of) class, the poststructuralist critique of Marxism, as Perry Anderson observes, suffers from a "poverty of strategy." 12 For when the radical-sounding dust settles, what this critique offers by way of political praxis contains precious little to distinguish it from bourgeois pluralism. Refusing to subsume the particularity and autonomy of the imperatives of any social group to the grinding dialectic of class analysis, it regards the Leninist party—particularly in its pretension to "represent" the articulated interests of the working class by means of a disciplined theory and practice—as the epitome of logocentrism and master-discourse-
ism. 13 Instead, the poststructuralist critique advocates an "interest-group politics" that, in the very ingenuousness of its promise to respect everyone's individuality, offers a meager threat to existing power hierarchies (and indeed possesses a curious kinship to the Reaganite tendency to define the needs of the vast majority of the population as "special interests"). Revolt and revolution fade into formalistically defined gestures of "opposition," directed not against capitalism but against a "power" that is at once omnipresent and evanescent—impossible ever to overcome, but peculiarly susceptible to poststructuralist "subversions" of various kinds. 14

13. For clear expressions of this antipathy to Leninist centralism, see Aronowitz, Crisis in Historical Materialism, especially 123–36, and Ryan, Marxism and Deconstruction, especially 159–212.
14. The reference to an omnipotent "power" is, of course, to Foucault. See, for example, Power/Knowledge: Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–79, trans. Colin
Moreover, in stressing the virtues of "democratic" socialism, poststructuralism frequently evinces a more than passing attachment to "democratic" capitalism, suggesting that we could retain our current form of "representative" government if only we could make it a bit less subservient to power interests."Democracy," in other words, emerges as a term above and beyond ideology, assimilable to the political programs of oppressed as well as oppressing classes. At best, in my view, this position signifies a naive assessment of capitalist democracy, which, while historically compelled through class struggle to grant certain restricted rights to its subservient masses, has never allowed for popular participation in the determination of social policy, encouraging instead the notion that political participation consists of going to the polls every few years. Moreover, it has closed off presumably guaranteed rights to protest and political expression at times when these have proven threatening to capitalist hegemony. What is more, the undeconstructed valorization of "democracy" obscures the fact that the same imperialist interests which grant a certain political latitude to relatively quiescent working classes in highly industrialized countries also support—through investment policies, the International Monetary Fund, and, at times, even military force—highly repressive political regimes elsewhere in the world. The problem poststructuralists encounter here is similar to that involved in the definition of the "new working class." If Marxism's poststructuralist critics were less enamored of a distinctly Western model of autonomous selfhood, wedded to an essentially contractual (read: coalitional) notion of collectivity, it would, I suspect, be less intimidated by notions of revolutionary solidarity, as well as more aware of the international totality in which Western "democracy" is implicated.

In short, I am arguing that poststructuralist pluralism, rather than pointing beyond an outmoded and authoritarian Marxism to a more genuinely egalitarian program for human emancipation, divests Marxism of much of its explanatory as well
as its revolutionary power and creates a series of new political impediments to the theorization—and practice—of social change. But if poststructuralism proposes such an inadequate reading of contemporary political and social formations, why does it exercise such a powerful rhetorical influence, at least upon potentially left-leaning academics? I would speculate that, in addition to its claim to having raised some questions that Marxism presumably cannot answer—a point upon which I shall elaborate in the second part of this paper—a certain amount of poststructuralism’s political appeal may stem from its conformity with—indeed, its reaffirmation of—a number of anti-Marxist ideas enjoying virtually unquestioned status in American universities. The notion that a Marxist class analysis sets out to crush various alternative types of oppositional consciousness, the postulation of a simplistic dualism between centralism and democracy, and the premise that Marxism’s aspiration to the status of a science necessitates reductionism—these and associated poststructuralist propositions suggest that, despite its pretension to a privileged awareness of the ideological freight carried by language, poststructuralist political theorizing has actually done little to move us beyond the antinomies of Cold War debate.

This is not to claim, of course, that the poststructuralists are merely a recent reincarnation of the New York Intellectuals. Aronowitz, for example, in a discussion of the repressive cultural authority of the anti-Stalinists in the post–World War II era, makes the useful observation that Lionel Trilling, in his fervid opposition to the presence of ideology in literature (meaning, of course, the wrong ideology), became the “mirror image” of Zhdanov, the chief organizer and theorist of cultural work in the Soviet Union during the heyday of socialist realism.15 But such a remark establishes kinship between Aronowitz and Trilling as well as distance, insofar as it assigns to the signifier “Zhdanov” a cluster of a prioristic meanings and connotations suggesting the repression of difference, the violation of particularity, and the intervention of authoritarian dogma in the creation of culture. Aronowitz deconstructs Trilling, in other words, by associating him with a shibboleth whose detestability is presumably so commonly acknowledged as to need no deconstruction.

15. Aronowitz, Crisis in Historical Materialism, 248.
Aronowitz should be credited for at least making explicit the reading of history that undergirds his critique of Marxism; many poststructuralist theorists simply invoke the absent presence of a shadowy "Stalinized" Marxism, allowing their charges of authoritarianism and scientism to make oblique reference to Cold War historical narrative without themselves undertaking any particularized historical analysis. The ghost of Stalin—or, more precisely, of the Western postwar construction of "Stalin"—looms behind a good deal of poststructuralism's political program, from its critique of dialectics and historical materialism in history and philosophy to its rejection of realism, totalization, and representation in literary and cultural theory. Thus Paul Bové, arguing that the "scientistic impulse" in Lukács and Lenin leads these theorists to develop totalizing paradigms "as coercive as the hegemony they oppose," concludes that both Western liberalism and Marxism are in many ways two sides of the same epistemological and ideological coin. "Since master discourses subject nature, humanity, and history to distorting models and plans for action," Bové claims, "radical intellectuals can no longer legitimately adopt the role of the traditional intellectual who produces totalizing and representative theories if they intend their work to be part of the struggle for social self-management and cultural autonomy." Along similar lines, Catherine Belsey's elevation of Brecht as a proto-deconstructionist and antirealist opposing the repressive regime of transparent realism presupposes an entire reading of the Brecht-Lukács debate that casts Lukács in the role of Stalinist commissar. Indeed, arguably much of the privileging of free play and undecidability in poststructuralist discourse, from Barthes forward, takes as its implicit or explicit antagonist not simply the platitudes of bourgeois ideology but also the presumed banality and dishonesty of "Stalinist" discourse.16

Without question, this invocation of a "Stalinized" Marxism is

16. Bové, "The Ineluctability of Difference," 11, 13; Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice (London: Methuen, 1980), and Roland Barthes, "Writing and Revolution," Yale French Studies, 39 (1967): 77–84. Clearly I disagree with Jonathan Arac's prefatory conclusion to his anthology of essays exemplifying what he calls "postmodern marxist intellectual activity": "Let us grant that [Trilling's generation and their inheritors] eradicated from American culture the dangers of Stalinism; now that it is gone, we are again free to explore possibilities on the left" (Postmodernism and Politics, xxix).
a powerful rhetorical ploy, for it enables poststructuralism to set itself in opposition not only to the phallogocentrism of a capitalist and racist patriarchy but also to the grim and repressive practice of state socialism. But it accomplishes this feat, in my view, only by practicing a reductionism at least as dogmatic as that of the “Stalinism” it purports to repudiate. It is indeed true that twentieth-century Marxist theory and practice have encountered some serious difficulties. It is even true that many of these difficulties stem from the political and economic course set for socialist construction during the Stalin era. However, for all its pretensions to have gone beyond the exhausted political paradigms of the modern era, poststructuralism fails to offer an emancipatory or viable political program. At best it posits a view of decenteredness that, if not a viable political program in itself, can at least serve as a cautionary guide against naive reflectionism on the one hand and premature totalization or closure on the other. At worst, however, it resuscitates Cold War political categories and actually puts itself in league, whether intentionally or not, with the Western liberal pluralism it purports to disdain. If we seek explanations for the reversal of the development of workers’ societies in our time, we do far better to consult Marxism itself, which is, in my view, capable of formulating not only a self-critical historical narrative but also a self-critical analytical paradigm. It is to the task of sketching out some outlines along which such a narrative and such a paradigm might be developed that I now turn.

II

While there are multiple challenges confronting contemporary Marxism, most of these relate more or less directly to the urgent need to theorize more precisely the connections between the “political” and the “economic,” as these have historically figured—in both theory and practice—in past defeats in the construction of socialism and as they will continue to figure in future social movements for egalitarianism. I shall frequently reflect back upon the analysis I have just made of poststructuralism’s critique of Marxism, but I shall primarily address the tasks involved in framing various auxiliary hypotheses from the vantage
point of Marxism's own self-critique, making use of premises and analytical categories derived from dialectics and historical materialism.

First, following from my rather polemical remarks above about poststructuralism's deployment of the anti-Stalinist binary oppositions inherited from bourgeois scholarship, I suggest that, if only as a ground-clearing operation, the term "Stalinism" be fully deconstructed and the so-called "Stalin era" be subjected to a thoroughgoing scrutiny. Recent scholarship—I am thinking here especially of John Arch Getty's and Roberta T. Manning's work on the Soviet purges—suggests that much bourgeois scholarship about the USSR in the 1930s and 1940s (such as that of Robert Conquest) is deeply compromised by its shoddy scholarship and that the death rolls Conquest and others cite in relation to such occurrences as the Ukrainian famine and the Moscow trials are fantastically inflated. Moreover, this recent scholarship suggests that certain received notions about Stalin's relation to the party apparatus—such as the idea that he enjoyed a virtual one-man dictatorship—are absurd: for better or worse, the policies that emanated from Communist Party and Comintern headquarters were far more likely to have been the result of collective deliberation on the part of the leadership of the Third International.17

Such a reconsideration of the historical record is important, I believe, not so that we may exonerate one or another set of historical actors or frame apologetics for crimes that have actually occurred but so that we may develop a materialist analysis of the process by which the building of socialism was reversed in the USSR. Central to this analysis, I believe, will be two investigations.

First, following the ground-breaking work of Charles Bettelheim, as well as of the Chinese revolutionary grouping Sheng-wu-lien, it will be necessary to assess the extent to which this reversal can be attributed not to external forces such as capitalist encirclement (formidable as these may have been) but rather to internal contradictions within the Soviet polity itself—most particularly, its commitment to the primacy of developing the productive forces. I hypothesize that this commitment—which I shall discuss more fully in a moment—had the effect of diverting attention from (indeed, at times, of directly undermining) the crucial task of developing egalitarian relations of production and, eventually, ended up solidifying relations of production that were essentially capitalist. From the vantage point of this analysis, the main abuse of the Stalin era—to which other abuses of centralist power can, I believe, be traced—was not that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) attempted to reduce the particularity and multiplicity of reality to an authoritarian, scientistic “line,” but that, more concretely, the “line” was wrong. Stalin’s principal “crime,” in other words, was to codify the technologizing of Marxism by proclaiming in 1936 that there was no more class struggle in the USSR and that communism had been achieved.18

Second, this reconsideration of the reversal of Soviet socialism would have to link the “economic” doctrine of the primacy of the productive forces—and the practice that flowed from this doctrine—to the principal “political” doctrine and practice developed during the “Stalin era”—namely, the Popular Front against Fascism. I hypothesize that fuller investigation into the Popular Front will reveal the peculiar irony that the revisionist abandonment of a class analysis in fact originated in the rhetoric and

practice of the Communist movement during this period. At the same time that it was turning away from the fostering of egalitarian relations of production in the USSR—and thus adopting a course guided by a technological determinist separation of the economic from the political—the Third International was also relinquishing (or at least indefinitely postponing) its commitment to proletarian revolution elsewhere in the world, instead calling upon the working class to enter into various class-neutral (democratic, popular, and nationalist) coalitions to defeat the fascist menace.19 By a strange turn of the historical wheel, then, the democratic and neopopulist ambience of the poststructuralist critique of Marxism, presumably aimed at Marxism's hard-line ("Stalinist") adherence to a strict class analysis of the bourgeois state, actually recapitulates the depoliticizing of the state that occurred during the Popular Front era and thus derives in large part from the very "Stalinist" theory and practice to which it sets itself in opposition.

The deconstruction and reconsideration of "Stalinism" that I am proposing here is of primary importance, however, not for the more materialist and critical narrative of the past that it enables, but for the opening it provides for retheorizing Marxism's conception of the relation between productive forces and class struggle in the shaping of history. A number of moves are involved here. To begin with, it will be necessary to clarify what Marx himself meant by positing the primacy of material production in determining the course of history. Many of the current debates about the "two Marxes"—the economist and the voluntarist, the scientist and the polemicist, the structuralist and the historian—

19. The locus classicus of the Popular Front position is Georgi Dimitroff's *United Front: The Struggle Against Fascism and War* (San Francisco: Proletarian Publishers, 1973), which presents and expands upon his presentation before the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern, where the Popular Front strategy (opposed, we should note, by the more revolutionary position of R. Palme Dutt, as in, for example, his *Fascism and Social Revolution* [New York: International Publishers, 1934]) was decided upon. For distinctly American ramifications of this strategy, see Earl Browder, *The People's Front* (New York: International Publishers, 1938). For a critique of the Popular Front strategy and its implications for revisionism in the world communist movement, see The Progressive Labor Party, "Road to Revolution III" (New York: Progressive Labor, 1972).
hinge, in my view, on a misreading of Marx’s theorization of the
dialectic between the productive forces and the relations of pro-
duction.20 Although Marx may have had his technicist moments
when he debated contemporaneous idealists like Proudhon, by
and large—especially in Capital and the Grundrisse—he was re-
markably consistent, as Michael Ryan and Ellen Woods have both
pointed out, in stressing the interpenetration of the “economic”
sphere by class antagonism.21 Thus the law of value, Marx in-
sisted, is coercive. Capital is not a thing but a social relation, always
dynamically exploitative and often violent, and the struggle over
the organization and fruits of material production is not simply a
conflict over economic surplus but a fight for control of the pro-
duction and reproduction of human life. In short, not only the
relations of production but the productive forces themselves are
“always already” inscribed with human agency and human con-
fusion: there simply is no hypostatized sphere of “the economic.”

I urge a comprehensive reencounter with Marx’s text along
the lines described above not because I wish to use the category of
production to reintroduce the autonomous subject of bourgeois
humanism into Marxism, but because I think it crucial for Marx-
ism to formulate the productive forces/relations of a production
dialectic in such a way that class struggle no longer appears exter-
nal to production, as a kind of epiphenomenal “political” eruption
occurring only when the fettering of forces by relations of pro-
duction results in an explosion of class contradiction. Dominated
as it has been by the technological determinist revisionism of the
Third International, Marxism badly needs a theoretical refutation

20. See, for example, Alvin Gouldner, The Two Marxisms: Contradictions and
Anomalies in the Development of Theory (New York: Seabury, 1980), Gerald A.
Cohen, Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence (Princeton: Princeton University
Press, 1978), Ryan, Marxism and Deconstruction, and Anderson, In the Tracks of
Historical Materialism. I find particularly troubling Anderson’s use of the term
“voluntarism” to designate the broader concept of “class struggle,” since “volun-
tarism” is a highly pejorative term in Marxist-Leninist vocabulary, suggesting the
idealism of a subjectivity wishing to impose itself upon historical process regard-
less of “external” determining circumstances. If Marxism has to choose between
economism and voluntarism, it is indeed lost.

21. Ryan, Marxism and Deconstruction, 82–102, and Woods, Retreat from Class,
68–69 passim. See also Samir Amin, The Law of Value and Historical Materialism,
of the paradigm that envisions the productive forces as the Caliban and the class struggle as the Prospero of historical development. Indeed, this refutation is essential to a critique of that revisionism, for it would help to account for the nature of the process (certainly a qualitative and counterrevolutionary one) by which, in the USSR, power was wrested from the working class and restored to a state capitalist bourgeoisie—a process that involved the purging of many proletarian forces from the CPSU but that nonetheless occurred without the visible “political” conflict we ordinarily associate with the notion of class struggle.22

When the category of “material production” is perceived as embedded in human agency, it should also be easier to perceive human agency as embedded in material production—and, in particular, to determine exactly what it means to speak of ideology as a “material force.” I indicated earlier my dissatisfaction with the poststructuralist stipulation that the working class should be stripped of its central revolutionary role and that alternative social groupings, distinguished by articulated subject position rather than relation to production, should be given pride of place. Nonetheless, I do concede that it is vitally necessary to theorize those specific features of the advanced industrial proletariat’s relation to production that give rise to its relatively impoverished sense of itself as a historical subject and, as a consequence, its relative acquiescence to its own exploitation. In other words, there is no need to abandon the notion that the class struggle over control of material production is the main contradiction shaping historical development, but there is an urgent need to understand those contradictions internal to the working class that prevent it from emerging as the principal aspect of that main contradiction and, ultimately, that prevent it from negating that main contradiction altogether.

In this context, it bears noting that the issue of racism—both

22. Note the title of Bettelheim’s study of the “economic” foundations of the onset of Soviet revisionism: Class Struggles in the USSR. Mao Tse-tung’s (Zedong’s) “Prefaces to Socialist Uprising in China’s Countryside, September and December 1955” (in Selected Works [New York: International Publishers, 1954], 4: 233–53) tellingly reveal the battle between leftist peasants and recalcitrant Party forces during the first phases of socialist construction in China. The clear indication is that the Party “tailed” the masses.
domestic and international—requires more attention than it rou-
tinely receives in discussions of proletarian self-consciousness. For
racism is at one and the same time an aspect of productive rela-
tions and of ideology—of base and superstructure, if you will—since it is constituted by the international division of labor and the superexploitation of peoples of color as well as by the political and social division of the working class along lines of race and nationality—a division that both enables and compounds the con-
tinuing exploitation of workers of all colors. As a “material force,”
then, racist ideology, which assigns separate cultural and/or bio-
logical essences to different segments of the population, serves to
reinforce and rationalize existing relations of production even as it
denies its own embeddedness in them. Racism’s “relative auton-
omy” derives not from any marginality in its material relation to
capitalist economy but from the role ideology plays in materially
producing falsely defined subject positions that correspond to the
real imperatives of capital.

Arthur Brittan and Mary Maynard, two poststructuralist the-
orists who argue that gender and race are forms of “oppression”
ot “reducible” to a class analysis of “exploitation,” posit that “in
no country can a class or economic argument explain the power of
whiteness, the strength of feeling with which it is expressed and
the extent to which populations are prepared to go in order for it
to be upheld.” Moreover, they note, Marxist analyses of race
“can[not] deal with the strength of feeling frequently expressed in
Black nationalist movements which usually transcend class lines.
For Marxists, such struggles must either be identified as a form of
false consciousness, or the significance of racial oppression is de-
nied, through the assumption that the ‘proper’ class struggle will
be waged at a later stage when national or racial liberation has
been achieved.” Accordingly, Brittan and Maynard conclude, “It
is the general racial oppression of blacks by whites, and not the
specific oppression of black workers by capital, which needs to be
explored and explained.”

To be sure, Brittan and Maynard are correct to criticize as
“economistic” those theorizations of racism that view racist ideol-
ogy as “just another aspect of an ideology conceived as a mere

23. Brittan and Maynard, Sexism, Racism and Oppression, 49.
reflection of economic forces.” When white racists in Howard Beach, N.Y., chased a black man out onto the highway where he was run over and killed, they were not simply acting on capitalism’s need to divide and conquer workers of different social groups: they were conscious human agents, choosing among various discourses and positions available in the 1980s United States, not just thoughtless pawns on the chessboard of production relations. But neither was their sadistic reveling in the “power of whiteness” a phenomenon founded merely in their whiteness, itself understood as a “material force”: if their act is to be analyzed as anything other than an efflux of biology on the one hand or some free-floating pathological psychology on the other, it must be seen as an expression of the concrete—indeed, violent—materiality of ideology. But poststructuralism’s decoupling of racism from class oppression—its conversion of the “relative autonomy” of racism into a virtually absolute autonomy, contingent upon its “irreducibility” to class contradiction—cannot account for the phenomenon of racism in materialist terms. Nor does the declaration that some white workers think of themselves as white before (or even rather than) proletarian, or that black nationalist politics at times guide the participation of oppressed peoples of color in antiracist or anticolonialist struggles, demonstrate that such political identification does not end up serving the interests of one or another segment of the middle class or the bourgeoisie. In confronting the issue of the relation of racial to class consciousness, contemporary Marxism needs to formulate not the limitations of class analysis but, instead, a theory of racism that acknowledges the nature and extent of the “relative autonomy” of racial consciousness at the same time that it traces the relativity of this autonomy to the “always already” political character of economic relations. To speak of racist ideology as a “material force” is not to posit that it has a materiality apart from the social relations within which it is embedded. Instead, it is to insist upon the extent to which “race” itself is a construct, corresponding not to any preexisting referent but rather to the ideological imperatives of capitalism in its various phases.24

If we grant that "ideology as a material force" may on the one hand critically retard the development of revolutionary movements, we should recognize that on the other it may play a much more determinative role in producing and hastening revolutionary change than is often conceded in those Marxisms that are dominated by the doctrine of the primacy of the productive forces. I am not suggesting, of course, that people can make revolutions just because they want to or that medieval peasants could have achieved communism. But Lenin, we must recall, posited that "revolutionary passion" was a key force in making and consolidating revolution, even as he railed against "voluntarists" who felt they could transform reality according to the dictates of their own will. And the entire revolutionary legacy of the Grand Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR)—albeit too little and too late to rescue the PRC from entrenched "capitalist-roaders" and too hesitant regarding the necessity for revolt against, rather than reform of, the state apparatus—reminds us forcibly that politics, once "put in command," does indeed become a material force. For what we should learn from the GPCR is neither that the masses of Chinese people were not ready for the theory and practice of the egalitarian "big pot" nor that the "big pot" entailed a premature "skipping" of preordained "stages" and was therefore disruptive of the further development of the forces of production. Rather, we should draw the lesson that, in the struggle to move from socialism to communism and to eradicate such capitalist survivals as the division of mental and manual labor, the relations of production themselves become the object of conscious political struggle.

racism as historically linked to the rise of capitalism, see David Brion Davis, The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), and William McKee Evans, "From the Land of Canaan to the Land of Guinea: The Strange Odyssey of the 'Sons of Ham,'" American Historical Review 85, no. 1 (February 1980): 15-43.

25. "[A] revolution is made, at the moment of its climax and of the exertion of all human capacities, by the class consciousness, the will, the passion and the fantasy of tens of millions who are spurred on by the most acute class struggle" (V. I. Lenin, "Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder, in Selected Works, 10: 139).

Indeed, we may go a bit further and speculate that what distinguishes the movement from socialism to communism from previous moments in what Gayatri Spivak calls the "great modes of production narrative"\textsuperscript{27} is precisely the need for the relations of production not to be seen as the secondary aspect of the dialectic between the forces and the relations of production but instead to emerge as the principal aspect of this contradiction. And we should recognize that this conflict is not, as Mao mistakenly supposed, a nonantagonistic one: it entails a continuation, albeit in different form, of the class struggle, and its issue is by no means preordained. Where Stalin held that the movement from socialism to communism was constituted by the further development of the productive forces, then, with the relations of production falling peacefully into line, quite the opposite may be the case. This movement may in fact be preeminently a "political" one in which the issue at stake is the political character of economic organization. In short, we may speculate—and more theoretical work on this question is badly needed—that the traditional Marxist view of socialism as a "transitional" phase, representing a qualitative rupture from capitalism but a merely quantitative relation to communism, is in error. Perhaps socialism should be construed as a separate mode of production, attained by the revolutionary rupture from private capitalism, but itself in need of revolutionary rupture if a society is to proceed to communist egalitarianism.\textsuperscript{28}

I am suggesting, in other words, that, in the light of twentieth-century experiences in building workers' and peasants' egalitarian societies, contemporary Marxism should undertake the theoretical work needed to enable it to adopt a series of auxiliary hypotheses that take these experiences into account. The writings

\textsuperscript{27} Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, \textit{In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics} (New York: Methuen, 1987), 197.

\textsuperscript{28} See Joseph Stalin, "Dialectical and Historical Materialism," in \textit{Problems of Leninism} (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), 835–73, and Mao Tse-tung (Zedong), "On Contradiction" and "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People," in \textit{Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Tsetung} (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1971), 85–133, 432–479. The implications of this position for the organizing strategy of communist parties are of course enormous, since it suggests that what may be needed is to bypass socialism altogether and to fight instead for a direct movement to communist economic relations (albeit with the necessary retention of a state apparatus for some time). See The Progressive Labor Party, "Road to Revolution IV" (New York: Progressive Labor, 1982).
of Marx, in my view, provide ample ground for a theorization of material production that reinstates the subject within the forces of production and reinscribes the political within the economic. Historical developments in our century, however, require that the specific forms of the "political," in both capitalist and socialist societies, be subjected to closer scrutiny. Certainly the most recent evidences of USSR and PRC revisionism—the various pro-entrepreneurial initiatives of perestroika on the one hand and the proposed institution of a Beijing stock market on the other—give this project strategic urgency. Insofar as poststructuralism has posed a series of bold challenges to Marxism, it has helped to goad on this retheorization, and for that we may be grateful. As I have indicated, however, poststructuralism's rejection of master discourses and its repudiation of the working class—while understandable responses to socialist bloc revisionism and the post—World War II development of imperialism—have little to offer beyond piecemeal reformism, utopian sentimentalism, or plain old cynicism. Better, in my view, to return to Marxism itself, which, for all the difficulties it has encountered, offers the only compelling analysis of social organization and the dynamics of social change that can chart a course beyond class society.

III

Having been silent so far about the issue of gender, I shall devote my final remarks to the specific challenges that poststructuralist feminism poses to the Marxist paradigm. Gender contradiction would appear to constitute a phenomenon different in kind from other forms of social division and oppression insofar as its ancient lineage (traceable in many but not all societies) suggests that, at least in some social formations, the theory and practice of women’s subordination may well predate the advent of class society. That is, unlike religious, racial, and national divisions and antipathies, which can be historically correlated with various phases of the development of class society, certain types of sexist social relations would appear to have emerged largely independent of the imperative to expropriate a surplus from a (male and female) class of subordinated laborers. While the oppression and exploitation presently experienced by the overwhelming majority
of the world’s women can (and, I believe, must) be understood principally as a function of their status as members of an exploited proletarian or peasant class, it is crucial that Marxists theorize women’s special oppression in ways that come to terms with their status as both productive workers and reproducers of labor power.29

It would appear that this dual focus upon production and reproduction confronts the Marxist conception of totality with a difficult challenge. For, on the one hand, Marxism seems committed to a monistic view of historical process: that is, it posits production as the central determinant of social relationships and class struggle as the central determinant of social motion. Therefore it generally repudiates historical narratives not based on this model of causality, pointing out that the postulation of multiple causations—such as those proposed by poststructuralism—leads to a potentially infinite range of explanatory models, resulting in what Perry Anderson calls a “randomization of history.”30 Yet, on the other hand, as Althusser remarks in his important essay “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” such a reduction of all historical development to the workings of a single dialectic has the effect of either pronouncing irrelevant all elements that do not conform to this dialectic or else of relegating these other elements to the status of epiphenomena emanating from a unitary essence. His development of the auxiliary hypotheses “determination in the last instance” and “relative autonomy” is part of his project to rehabilitate Marxism’s claim to status as a master discourse by arguing that various superstructural elements can at times be primary determinants of development: the “economic” stands in the wings as a sort of master of ceremonies, sometimes asserting its right to a starring role, sometimes generously allowing other characters to play their own parts and garner their own applause.31


There is no doubt that Althusser's project has had real value. For working out the particularities of the gender contradiction as well as for addressing other issues, however, I find his auxiliary hypothesis of "overdetermination" somewhat troublesome, since it posits no theoretical limit to the multiplicity of forces supplementing the primary impetus of class struggle at any given conjuncture and thus comes perilously close to the randomization theories against which Althusser, as a Marxist, wants to set himself in opposition. What I do find suggestive in this essay, however, is a point that Althusser confines to a footnote—namely, his observation that Mao's distinctly un-Hegelian elaboration upon the categories of dialectics offers a particularly fruitful ground for further theorization. In particular, Mao argues for an important distinction between primary contradictions, which determine the principal course of development of a thing or a process, and secondary contradictions, whose form of development is largely determined by the primary contradiction, but which are not equivalent to it. In the course of the development of this thing or process, through which the primary contradiction sooner or later undergoes negation, a shift occurs in the overall relation among contradictions, and a contradiction formerly possessing secondary status in the determination of motion may now come to assume primary status. In other words, Mao's theorization helps us to steer clear of the dogmatism of assigning all contradictions to an epiphenomenon of one main contradiction, at the same time that it insists that, until the main contradiction undergoes negation, other contradictions cannot become essence-determining for the totality in which they are inserted. Without either granting absolute autonomy to various contradictions or equalizing them, it posits a logic for grasping the hierarchy among contradictions: at the same time, it shows this hierarchy itself to be a dialectical product, susceptible to continual negation.

To return to the issue of gender: abstract as it may sound, this model can, I believe, be suggestive in outlining the relation between the contradictions of gender and class. First, it allows us to understand social formations as constituted by the sum of con-

tradictions composing them. In any given period, one contradic-
tion exerts the dominant role in determining the developmental
course of a society, but the other contradiction is not therefore
reducible to it. Thus, in class society, class antagonism constitutes
the principal source of motion, and relations between genders are
profoundly shaped by this class antagonism, but all types of sexist
oppression need not be seen as exclusively caused by that class
antagonism. Second, this model allows theoretical space for the
historical precedence of patriarchy over class antagonism: the pri-
macy of class antagonism during the epoch of class society does
not entail the primacy of class antagonism in all eras. Third, this
model suggests that, after a proletarian revolution, there is no
reason to assume that the establishment of egalitarian relations of
production would in and of itself produce sexual equality. To be
sure, the abolition of capital would entail drastic alterations in
gender relations, in that the elimination of those forms of eco-
nomic discrimination that provide a powerful material basis for
the continuance of many “superstructural” forms of sexism in
class society would clearly entail some profound alterations in
relations between and among men and women. Yet there would
be no reason to assume that the correction of inequities arising
from the sphere of production would automatically entail the cor-
rection of inequities arising from women’s roles in reproduction.
On the contrary: the postulation of gender as a secondary contra-
diction leaves room for the possibility that, once class antagonism
has been removed—like an enormous obstacle in the road of
humanity—the contradiction of gender may well become pri-
mary. Indeed, the battle of the sexes, heretofore confined to frag-
mentary (because class-bound) skirmishes, may indeed take on
epic proportions, emerging—at least for a time—as the principal
contradiction shaping social development.

No doubt this model is open to attack. On the one hand it can
be accused of being a clever, re-dialecticized version of the same
old Marxist masculinism, insofar as it continues to posit the pri-

33. For an account of the emancipating effects of Soviet socialism upon women
in the 1920s and early 1930s, see Fannina W. Halle, Women in Soviet Russia, trans.
Margaret M. Green (London: Routledge, 1933), and Ella Winter, Red Virtue:
macy of class struggle in the present era and ignores the specific features of women's subordination that point to its "material" grounding in a pattern of oppression that supersedes the capitalist wage relation. On the other hand, this proposed model can be accused of smuggling the model of multiple causality in through the back door, insofar as it posits a locus of causality in historical development other than struggle over the control of the social surplus.

I cannot respond to such weighty charges in detail, but I can indicate the direction an adequate reply might pursue. In response to the first, I would point out that traditional Marxist speculations about the shifting of the main contradiction after the abolition of classes tend to jump from society to the universe, positing that the main contradiction would be between humanity and nature, or consciousness and materiality. The dialectical formulation I am proposing here is quite different, for it argues that society is itself constituted by a sum of contradictions, of which class, while presently primary, is only one. The abolition of classes, therefore, does not in and of itself abolish all other contradictions. Besides, to adjudge that something is a secondary contradiction is not to claim that it is an intrinsically secondary issue, always to be subordinated to other considerations; it is only to state that the historical conditions have not yet emerged which will enable the contradiction fully to work itself out. At the same time, the designation of sexism as a secondary contradiction has the advantage of proposing a more rigorous theory than is afforded in the various Marxist-feminist paradigms that postulate a "partnership" of patriarchy and capitalism, which, while indicating the multiple ideological and material axes along which sexist and capitalist social relations are mutually reinforcing, obscure the locus of causality. For example, Heidi Hartmann's theory that all men, regardless of class, materially "benefit" from their power over the labor of women is so complicated by the hegemony of capital over all male and female laborers as to be virtually useless as a model of causality. So long as capital continues to exert such a powerful determining influence upon the material and ideological conditions of human existence in both the workplace and the family, feminist theories purporting to account for the special oppression of women and to describe the dynamics of power relations be-
tween the sexes are severely inhibited in their attempt to separate out “causes” not implicated in this hegemony. Similarly, the model that would represent capitalism as something grafted on to patriarchy, in my view, substantially distorts the largely gender-blind nature of class exploitation in the era of industrial capitalism and imperialism.34

In response to the second criticism, however, I would point out that to hypothesize that gender might in the future assume the role of a primary contradiction in no way entails a “randomization” of the Marxist model of causality. As Marx once noted, it is capitalism that collapses all material causes into a fetishized notion of the “economic”; a genuinely materialist analysis of social formations must treat “material production” not as a “general category,” but “in its determined historical form.” Moreover, as Engels points out, “the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life,” a process involving not only the “production of the means of existence” but also “the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species.”35 Even though it is, I believe, crucial to concede that, at present, it is indeed the capitalist construction of the “economic” that furnishes the “material basis” for the main dynamics of exploitation and oppression, this obviously does not mean that, once the “economic” has been abolished along with the wage system, there will be no more “material production.” On the contrary: it means that the removal of the “production of the means of existence” from the realm of commodification will enable the “propagation of the human species”—particularly as embodied in inherited forms of the sexual division of labor within the family—to emerge as the primary locus of “material produc-

tion” in which the “political” remains inscribed. And this suggests, in turn, that certain of the analytical categories by means of which contemporary feminist theory attempts to describe the “material basis” of gender oppression—Chodorow’s theory of mother rejection in child socialization, for example, or Brittan and Maynard’s theory of gender objectification as a function of the objectification of nature—can once again be considered as possible models for describing and explaining the oppression of women. In other words, along with changes in “material production,” the locus of “material” causality may well be perceived to change as well, and analytical accounts that at present appear to suffer from biological determinism, on the one hand, or psychologistic idealism, on the other, may well emerge as potentially valid ways of accounting for whatever survivals of sexism persist in a communist society.

Admittedly, much of the preceding theorizing about sexism as a secondary contradiction is highly speculative and no doubt open to criticism on a variety of counts that I have not mentioned. Certainly, the point must be conceded that Marxism has not yet worked out an adequate theory of the relation of production to reproduction. I shall close by observing, however, that, even as regards the issue of gender contradiction, where Marxism is certainly vulnerable, I find Marxism—warts and all—preferable to poststructuralism. For poststructuralism, while paying lip service to the need for women’s autonomy and particularity, assumes that the women’s movement will be for the most part content with a politics of refused mastery and decentered subjectivity. This politics not only confines its proponents to the piecemeal reformism I described before: by a curious turn of the wheel, it also reinscribes women within patriarchal relations of dominance. For, as Nancy Hartsock points out, it seems more than a little suspicious that centered subjectivity has been pronounced passé at the very moment when women—at least some women, in any case—are able to overcome their marginality and make a bid for centrality.36 While Marxism clearly cannot afford to allow the capitalist reduction of the “material” to the “economic” to dominate its own theorizing about causality, it has nonetheless the tremendous advan-

36. See the discussion in n. 6, above.
tage of recognizing that social hierarchies of various kinds are essentially immovable until inequalities within production relations are removed. If the project of "changing Marx" entails the formulation of an auxiliary hypothesis recognizing the discreteness and particularity of gender contradiction, this is well and good. If, however, it entails the stipulation that gender and class are situated in merely conjunctural relation to one another, it runs the far greater danger of stripping Marxism of its usefulness both as an explanatory model and as a guide to praxis.