

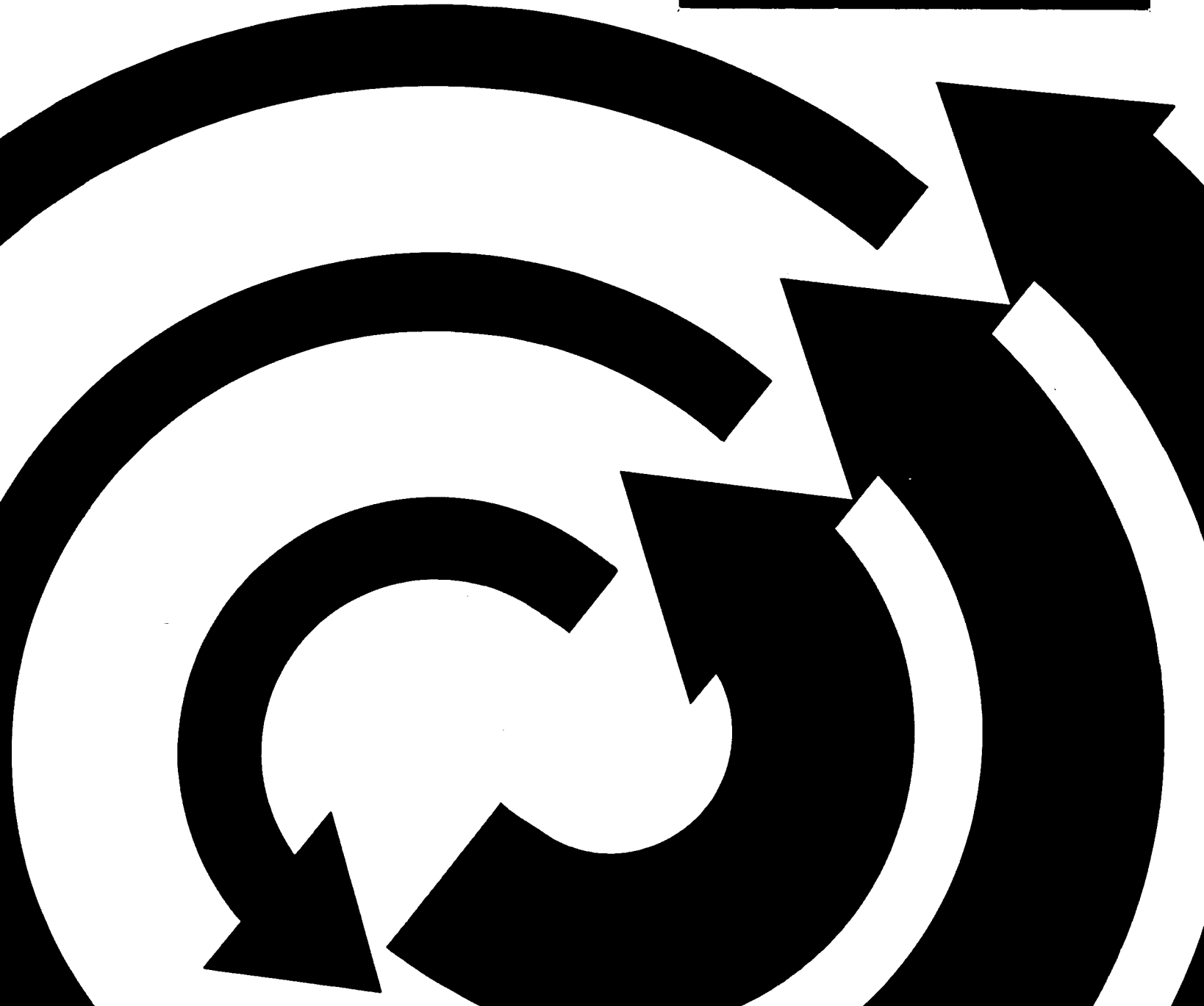
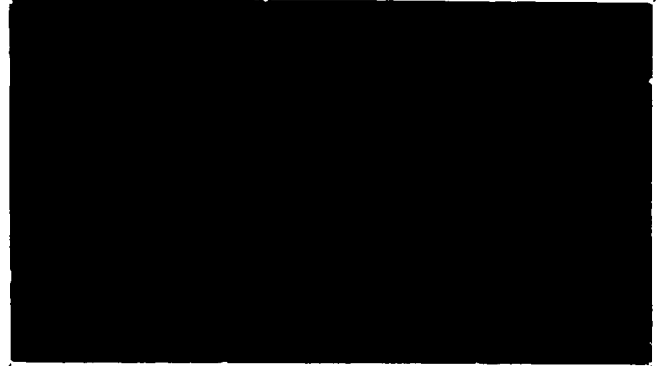


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**FROM GENDER TO THE THIRD-WORLD:
EXTENDING STANDPOINT THEORY TO THE
EXPERIENCE OF THE OPPRESSED**

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**FROM GENDER TO THE THIRD-WORLD:
EXTENDING STANDPOINT THEORY TO THE EXPERIENCE
OF THE OPPRESSED**

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I would like to thank our "Rethinking Marxism" study group at the Center for Research on Social Organization in the Sociology Department of the University of Michigan for the great intellectual stimulation that led to this article. The comments and enthusiastic support of its members, Julia Adams, Tomas Almaguer, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Howard Kimeldorf, Rick Lempert, Mark Mizruchi, Jeffrey Paige, Sonya Rose are much appreciated. Thanks also to Michael Kennedy who gave very astute comments on the original draft. As always, I claim responsibility for all the shortcomings of this final form.

This article searches for a theoretical framework that could specifically incorporate the experience of the oppressed. After reviewing the feminist critiques of historical materialism within the context of standpoint theory, and after analyzing Third-world perspectives on oppression, it argues that rather than post-modernism, a new historical materialism which incorporates the subject's experience into its analysis of social structure could generate such a theoretical framework.

Within the context of historical materialism, even though Marx and Engels' arguments on class oppression have always been informed by historical conditions, most of the subsequent Marxist analysis has abstracted itself from the societal experience. In the sociological explanations provided, structural determinants often overshadowed social agency. The seminal work in this tradition is that of Barrington Moore Jr. (1967) on the social origins of dictatorship and democracy which highlights the structural patterns in societies that generate different political outcomes. The works of sociologists such as Theda Skocpol (1978), Ellen Trimberger (1978), Jack Goldstone (1991), Rogers Brubaker (1992) closely follow and replicate the structural elements of Moore's model. Yet this model's conception epistemologically favors structure over agency. This critique becomes more evident when one considers the alternate approach as formulated by E. P. Thompson in his seminal work (1963) on the making of the English working class where he explicitly criticizes the structuralist approaches and, in order to capture agency, bases his alternate conception specifically on the historical experience of the worker. Subsequent works by scholars such as William Sewell, Jr. (1980, 1985), Ron Aminzade (1981), Howard Kimeldorf (1988) and Sonya Rose (1992) further articulate the agency of social actors through in-depth historical-sociological analysis. The structural tendency to overlook the agency of social actors is thus offset by the interpretive emphasis on the historical experience.

Yet, two questions still remain: First, how analytically rigorous is the category of experience as a sociological concept? And second, how can one capture, in addition to workers and women, the experience of oppressed groups such as racial and ethnic minorities, and the Third-world people? These two questions first lead us to study the use of the category of experience within the context of class formation (Thompson 1963) and of gender analysis (Smith 1992, 1990, 1989, 1987). We are then alerted to the continuities in the Third-world experience of oppression. Possible theoretical solutions to the incorporation into sociological theory of the category of experience steer us to postmodernism and to a new historical materialism. The article argues that a reinterpretation of historical materialism from the viewpoint of the subject's experience of the social structure may capture the analytical rigor of both social structure and the subsequent social action.

From Historical Materialism to the Worker's Experience

Marx and Engels' analysis of capitalism in Western Europe sum up the two original contributions of historical materialism to sociological. First, they carefully delineate how historical conditions determine social action and social structure to produce class oppression. Second, they hint on how social action, spearheaded by the oppressed proletariat, has the capacity to transform social structure. Subsequent Marxist analyses have based their interpretations solely on the abstractions Marx and Engels made at the level of social action and social structure. These analyses have overlooked the historicity of Marx and Engels' analyses as well as the historicity of their own contemporary analytical frameworks. In their theory of class oppression, Marx and Engels were both constricted and empowered by the historical conditions of their social environment. The specific juncture of capitalist development, the workers' exploitation within

the industrial structure, the political upheavals all combined to inform their theory. Similarly, subsequent Marxist analyses were very much influenced in their analyses with the international developments in capitalism, the worldwide increase in worker's and the political dangers facing their societies. The extensive empirical analyses that Marx and Engels engaged in enabled them to utilize their historicities constructively. Yet the increased theoretical abstractions and generalizations of the subsequent Marxist analyses reduced their epistemological awareness of their historicities, namely the specific effect of the contemporary conditions on their own analytical frameworks. By obliterating historicity, Marxist analysis seems to have lost two crucial attributes: the agency of the oppressed people embedded in their particular historicities, and the compassion of the Marxist scholars themselves embedded in their own contemporary world.

Yet one perspective within Marxist analysis, the one I have termed "interpretivist," was able to sustain the original focus on historicity. It was in this context that E. P. Thompson evolved the concept of the worker's experience in analyzing the problem of class formation. He explicitly stated that (1963: 9)

By class I understand an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material experience and in consciousness...The notion of class entails the notion of historical relationship. Like any other relationship, it is a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomise its structure...The relationship must always be embodied in real people and a real context.

Indeed, the determinacy of structure in sociological analysis could only be avoided by bringing in the temporality of events. And it is the emphasis on the experience of class that differentiates E. P. Thompson from his contemporaries. He specifically argues (1963: 11) that "class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is the only definition." The most significant consequence of E. P. Thompson's approach for sociological analysis was thus the reinvigoration of the concept of agency.

Yet how analytically rigorous was this alternative formulation in confronting the alternative ones which gave primacy to social structure in explaining social action? Indeed, even though the worker's experience successfully mediated between productive relations and class consciousness, the concept of experience itself was inadequately theorized. As Sewell has currently elaborated (1990: 59), E. P. Thompson's meaning of the term experience was "intrinsically amorphous," appearing to encompass both productive relations and class consciousness, the two terms between which it was supposed to mediate. Hence, in the end, the concept of experience failed this mediation by becoming an amorphous, all encompassing, totalizing concept with no analytical rigor. Sewell argues (1990: 70) that one also needs to take into account the "formal structure of the conceptual transformation" that preceded and shaped the experience. Hence one needs an account of structural dynamics as well as experiential moments in order to capture the entirety of the social experience. Have there been any theoretical approaches that focused on experience and critically delved into its structural and practical determinants? It is in this context that feminist theory becomes crucially pertinent to sociological analysis. The feminist focus on the social construction of gender provides significant insights into the possible operationalization of the structural and practical determinants of the social experience.

From the Worker's Experience to Gender: Dorothy Smith, Sandra Harding and Patricia Hill Collins

Feminist theory argues that in very significant ways, women's experience and the gender oppression on which it is based resembles the worker's experience and the class oppression within which that is embedded. Hence, through studying the feminist analyses on women's experience, we can gain additional insights into

the sociological construction of the concept of social experience. Also, the fact that feminists based their studies of gender oppression on Marxism enables us to recreate a new historical materialism that takes into account the experience of the oppressed groups other than workers.¹

As feminists tried bring in the viewpoint of gender oppression to contemporary Marxist theory, however, they found its categories to be constricting. Such a constriction, many of them argued, was a recent phenomenon that did not exist at the original conception of historical materialism in late nineteenth century. They added that it was the more contemporary epistemological break between structuralism and humanism within Marxist analysis that had produced this outcome. Within the feminist discourse, two different explanations on this perceived epistemological break emerged. One focused on the alternate visions of socialism within historical materialism that were then obliterated at the expense of the structuralist vision. In order to encompass the women's experience, Barbara Taylor's (1983) study of the Owenites attempted to resuscitate this humanistic vision. The other discourse engaged in an epistemological critique by analyzing how subsequent Marxist interpretations alienated the scholar from his/her text and destroyed the agency of the subjects. Dorothy Smith's works (1990, 1989, 1987) in particular articulated this perspective so as to recapture social agency and, with it, the women's experience.

Barbara Taylor's analysis of the relationship between socialism and feminism articulated how the Owenite strategy, which Marx and Engels rejected as socialist utopianism, indeed contained the humanistic perspective that historical materialism eventually lost. This was specifically evident in the Owenite critique

¹ One should note that Marx and Engels also studied patriarchal oppression within the context of the family. But their theorization of patriarchal oppression very much derived from their highly original class oppression analyses.

of contemporary society which expanded beyond Marxism and class analysis to include, as social theorists now advocate, "all forms of social oppression, whether experienced in the workplace, marketplace, the school or the home" (Taylor 1983: 21). According to this Owenite perspective, all human relations were to be reconstructed not on power, but instead on the emotional platform of love. In addition, once society was organized around human needs, women's physical disabilities were to be offset by social arrangements which gave them the maximum support. Hence this socialist perspective promised women a much more active participation in society; it proposed to build support networks for women that would eventually allow them to build an alternative formulation to capitalism. In addition, it wanted to eliminate personal dependence in favor of the communal unit upon which both men and women relied equally, thus indirectly obliterating the economic foundations of male domination (Taylor 1983: 37). This socialist vision that included women was abandoned for a more structuralist version by Marx and Engels who rejected "the Eden of socialist hope before the bitter apple of class warfare had matured" (Taylor 1983: xvii).

Even though the historical conjuncture indeed forced Marx and Engels to make the choice of retaining the structuralist component of class analysis to the detriment of the humanistic one, subsequent Marxist analyses, by their very atemporal approaches to class oppression, persistently failed to reintroduce the humanistic component. Yet Taylor's historical analysis does not proceed to provide an alternate formulation that would overcome this shortcoming. It is only through Dorothy Smith's critical analyses of sociological epistemology that the foundation of such an alternate was laid.

Dorothy Smith and Women's Experience Dorothy Smith has introduced two new concepts into the basic arguments of historical materialism: women's experience (to capture gender oppression) and ideological practice (to

explain male hegemony). Her attempts to rework historical materialism have led her to articulate the parallels between the experiences of women and the proletariat. She thus elaborated how ideological practice and social structure often interacted to produce and reproduce hegemony. Dorothy Smith's work was particularly seminal in the critique it provided of historical materialism. She argued that, in spite of her cutting commentary, that only historical materialism was epistemologically capable of analyzing gender oppression.

Dorothy Smith commenced her critique of historical materialism by comparing the compassion in Marx and Engels's original writings with the contemporary dearth in Marxist scholarship. The empirical grounds for this comparison was located in her own personal experience. "When I was teaching a course on women and class a few years ago," Smith stated, "I had this experience" (1989a: 44):

We did a critical review of some of the major contemporary theorists of class, Olin Wright, Poulantzas, Carchedi and so forth. Then we read Marx and Engels' *The Communist Manifesto*. There was a startling difference. The latter locates the reader in the movement of history; classes are not mapped out as a structure consisting of categories of persons or positions; the reading subject is located at a moment between a past, in which classes have arisen and that subjected society to their conditions of appropriation, and a future, in which the proletariat abolishes previous conditions of appropriation and thereby appropriation itself. Readers are placed pronominally; the bourgeoisie is directly addressed as an other, in opposition to the "we" situated on this side of the struggle, our side. "You are horrified," Marx and Engels write to that other subject, "at our intending to do away with private property." "You reproach us with intending to do away with property" and "that is what we intend." The irony is heavy here. The "you" and "yours" are the bourgeoisie, addressed directly. "We" are the communists whose position is stated in the *Manifesto* by the communist authors; "we" creates a position for the subject in the text that is home for whoever takes our side; "we" are placed by this textual act *in* the class struggle.

Hence Dorothy Smith noted how Marx and Engels's original writings did not have the epistemological gap that had recently developed between the Marxist scholar and his/her analysis. One could still feel the passion that they felt for their subject

and the cause. Yet claims of objectivity, generalizability, and theoretical abstraction had slowly forced this passion to ebb to the point that there was not spirit left but only bare structure. It was this ebbing passion, this sense of agency on the part of both the researcher and his\her subject, that Dorothy Smith tried to restore.

In her work, Smith dramatically illustrated the extent of this disjuncture by directly confronting her reader in her narrative. As she stated (Smith 1989b: 42):

So here I am, and there you are, my reader. Here I am writing this in a third-floor room looking out at the large old maple tree (now dying from the effects of acid rain) that shades my attic in summer and half-hearing in the background on the radio the latest figures on unemployment in the United States. The linear text conceals my transition from cafe lunch to workroom. And you, wherever you are, are reading. There is a movement in time, I am writing now, you are reading then. I writing then and you reading now. The text lies between us, organizing our relation.

Hence this textual organization constantly mediated the meaning of social experience for the reader; sociology even deliberately arranged this mediation to distance the research from his\her subject so as to ensure "objectivity." Dorothy Smith thus dramatically accented these hidden arrangements by addressing her reader directly, making us once more conscious of the actual distance we place between ourselves as researchers and our subjects. It made apparent the degree to which sociologists, have, in the name of objectivity and moral distance from social phenomena, alienated themselves from the objects of their analyses.²

This alienation was further amplified by the plethora of texts that employed historical materialism. The increasing distance between sociologists and their subjects in the name of objectivity was further amplified by the vast number of

² Even though Smith points out the omnipotence of the text as the only mediator between the author and her audience, she nevertheless does not take the postmodern perspective which privileges the text over social structure and social action.

texts that employed historical materialism only to further dilute its humanistic vision. As Dorothy Smith (1989a:45) put it:

Contemporary Marxist texts on class...characteristically take advantage of the elaborate textual devices developed in the social sciences since Marx and Engels wrote. These constitute social and economic relations as if they went forward without the presence of actual subjects; characteristically they construct a temporal order that does not situate the reader in a historical trajectory from past to future; characteristically the reading and writing subjects, if they are explicitly present, are external to the phenomenon of which the texts speak.

Hence this alienation of Marxist scholars from their analyses was, for Dorothy Smith, the major cause of the current despiritiveness in historical materialism. Ironically, it was the Marxist scholars themselves, who, while criticizing the alienation of workers from their labor, ended up removing themselves from their own labor and its products for society at large. Because of this alienation, they fell instead into the vicious circle of reifying Marxist principles. Once in the circle, rather than destroying the existing power hegemony, Marxists scholars reproduced it instead.

How could Marxist scholars recover their lost agency? Smith argues that the first step is to return to the original texts with the explicit aim to problematize the current interpretations. To illustrate her argument,³ she then reanalyzes Marx's *German Ideology* from the standpoint of her own experience as a woman and a Marxist scholar. Like the original Marx she is focusing on, Dorothy Smith asserts, we as sociologists should always focus on the direct experience rather than on the abstract social structure that often emerges from Marx's depictions. She constantly reiterates the chasm that has developed in materialist analysis between a social scientific concept and the actual activities it

³ Dorothy Smith specifically argues (1990b: 34) that Marx "proposes to ground social science in the activities of actual individuals and the material conditions thereof, more specifically in the forms of cooperation or social relations that arise from and organize their activities."

expresses. Instead, she summarizes her position (1990b: 37-8) by quoting the *German Ideology* where Marx explicitly declared that "where speculation ends -- in real life -- there real, positive science begins: the representation of the practical activity of men." It is this reinterpretation of Marx that enables Dorothy Smith to bring in women's experience as the practical activity Marx pertains to, thereby extending the male experience Marx often focused on to cover that of the female.

Yet why has the women's experience (and, we can add, for our own purposes, the experience of the oppressed) not led to their liberation from gender oppression? For Dorothy Smith, the key lies in the ideological practice of the relations of ruling that are contained in capitalism. She first defines relations of ruling as (1990a: 6) "the complex of extra-local relations that provide in contemporary societies a specialization of organization, control, and initiative. They are those forms that we know as bureaucracy, administration, management, professional organization, and the media -- even though they are for the most part textually mediated." These relations of ruling shape, and, in women's case, inhibit social action. She then locates the social origins of this inhibition in the practice of capitalism. Smith states that (1989a: 49) "capitalism breaks the integration of production and reproduction," thereby disadvantaging women. She elucidates this conjecture in an earlier piece where she suggests that (1987a: 5):

Historically the organization of these relations (of ruling) and their dynamic expansion are intimately linked to the dynamic progress of capital. Capitalism creates a wholly new terrain of social relations external to the local terrain and the particularities of personally mediated economic and social relations. It creates an extralocal medium of action constituted by a market process in which a multiplicity of anonymous buyers and sellers interrelate and by an expanding arena of political activity. These extralocal, impersonal, universalized forms of action became the exclusive terrain of men, while women became correspondingly confined to a reduced local sphere of action organized by particularistic relationships.

Subsequently, as capitalism represents the men's standpoint as universal, and as it gives more and more authority to the male voice, women become silenced and their experiences disregarded.

Sociologists also inadvertently reproduce and enhance these silences as they use the biased concept of "objectivity" in their analyses of contemporary capitalism. Dorothy Smith specifically criticizes the scientific convention of "objectivity" that starts the sociological endeavor at the level of social action, which is always assumed to be a "neutral" social fact. She argues, however, that social action is a socially preconstituted consequence of human experience, and therefore already partial to gender. She dramatically explains (Smith 1989b: 34) how, as sociologists write "the social into texts, making them recognizable to readers as sociology and generating the phenomenal words that organize the multiple theoretical enclaves of the discourse," they end up unintentionally recreating the relations of ruling that the texts carry and transmit. What then one is to do to overcome this gender bias at the level of social action? Dorothy Smith proposes that we as researchers focus on everyday occurrences such as factual accounts of mental illness, micro-politics of a meeting, and their sociological descriptions to critically decipher the relations of ruling embedded within them.⁴

According to Dorothy Smith, only through bridging the epistemological divide in contemporary sociology between the experiences of the everyday world and larger institutional ideologies that sociology substitutes for "social facts" can we regenerate agency in sociological analysis in general, and in women's agency in

⁴ One can argue that this extensive use of texts to demonstrate gender oppression is methodologically similar to postmodernism. Yet Smith does not agree with the postmodern reign of the text; she (1990a: 4-5) points out that the "ideology of postmodernism permanently seals off any attempt to find an escape hatch for inquiry beyond the textual surface of discourse." The standpoint of women (read women's experience embedded in social structure and ideological practice) provides such an escape hatch as the woman's experience returns her to the actualities of her life.

particular. As the foundation of this new sociology, Smith proposes (1989b: 38) that we undertake "an insider's sociology;" this sociology works from the site of knowing (i.e., from experience) which precedes the differentiation of the subjective (action) and the objective (structure). Historical materialism still provides for her the analytical parameters of her approach, as the concept of class still captures for Dorothy Smith the actual organization of relations in which our lives are embedded. Yet she proposes to reposition Marx and Engels's definition of class in order to overcome its historical specificity.⁵ What type of analysis would this repositioning of the Marxist scholar and the realignment of Marxist analysis lead to? The following blueprint summarizes the main points of the new sociological approach (1989a: 44-5):

The text places the reader historically; class struggle is going on and you are in the middle of it. The sides are drawn up in the text itself as subjects are directly summoned and addressed. We can enter ourselves directly into its drama. Class is not objectified in the text as it is in the elaborate theoretical constructs of the contemporary Marxist theorists, needing rather careful fitting to the actualities of contemporary social relations. Rather, class emerges as a great historical process of struggle *in which the pamphlet and its analysis are situated*. The time of the text is just exactly that hinge where the past turns on a present that will be making the future. This is where you, as reading subject, are placed in the pamphlet. The polemic of the text is a call on you to act at precisely this juncture. But the temporal setting of reading and writing subjects in an historical trajectory of which the text itself is part isn't just a polemical effect. Though the reader isn't always being called on to act as he (I use the pronoun advisedly) is here, Marx and Engels' analyses generally have this historically situated character; the time of the text isn't separate from the historical time of which it speaks.

What is most significant in the alternative political economy that Smith advocates here is her call for (1989a: 56) "an openness to the multiple sites of experience (including race, class and gender) in contemporary capitalism and the evolution of a systematically developed social consciousness (a political economy, a sociology)"

⁵ She states (1989a: 56-7) that "nonetheless inheriting the tradition of analysis they founded, entering at a later stage the same historical trajectory, and caught up in the same historical struggles that they carried, (Marx and Engels') work is original and the model for ours."

that does not depend upon collapsing them into a single over-riding standpoint." Yet, how to theoretically articulate these multiple sites of experience? One must note that, in a current issue of *Sociological Theory*, three scholars (Lemert 1992, Collins 1992, Connell 1992) identified the construction of the women's experience -- which Smith treats as a "natural knowing process" devoid of any social constraints -- as the main theoretical weakness of her model. Hence Dorothy Smith equips us with an insight but she does not fully articulate her alternative theoretical approach. For that, we need to turn to feminist theory which elaborates on the multiple sites of experience, particularly at the intersections of gender, class, and race.

Sandra Harding and the Gender Experience of Oppression The most analytically articulate theoretical conception of the concept of social experience is contained in the "feminist standpoint theory" that Sandra Harding advocates in her works (1991, 1987a, 1987b, 1986, 1975). By drawing on the materialist analysis of the class oppression of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie to outline women's oppression by men, Harding comes closest to critically reinterpreting Marxist analysis within feminist parameters.⁶ She terms this theoretical perspective, which is based on the premise that knowledge is socially situated, feminist standpoint theory because it approaches the construction of knowledge from the socially problematized vantage point of the actors that are

⁶ Harding also outlines and analyzes two other feminist epistemological programs, namely feminist empiricist philosophy which tries to correct "bad science," and feminist postmodernism which is "suspicious of the Enlightenment loyalties inherent in such scientific and epistemological projects" (Harding 1991: vii). Feminist empiricists specifically argue (Harding 1987a: 182-3) "that sexist and androcentric biases are eliminable by stricter adherence to the existing methodological norms of scientific inquiry, that the context of discovery is just as important as the context of justification for eliminating social biases that contribute to partial and distorted explanations and understandings, and that women (or feminists, male and female) as a group are more likely than men (nonfeminists) as a group to produce claims unbiased by androcentrism, and in that sense objective results of inquiry." With respect to feminist postmodernism, Harding argues specifically that although feminist postmodernists sensitize us to multiple realities, they do not guide us with a clearly defined research agenda.

engaged in the process. Dorothy Smith, Nancy Hartsock (1987), Hilary Rose (1983), and Sandra Harding herself are then identified as the main proponents of this theory.

Sandra Harding explicitly traces the origins of this perspective to Marxist analysis as she notes that (1991: 120):

This justificatory approach originates in Hegel's insight into the relationship between the master and the slave and the development of Hegel's perceptions into the "proletarian standpoint" by Marx, Engels, and Georg Lukacs. The assertion is that human activity, or "material life," not only structures but sets limits on human understanding: what we do shapes and constrains what we can know.

Once subjects thus recapture their agency through bringing in their standpoints, through acknowledging the social situatedness, i.e., historicity, of their beliefs, their ensuing analysis produces less partial and less distorted interpretations of social experience. This formulation is contrary to the norms of objectivity advocated by the scientific method; feminist standpoint theorists argue instead (Harding 1987a: 185) that research directed by social values and political agendas produce empirically preferable results of research. Hence, the argument continues, the subject of liberatory feminist knowledge ought to be explicitly multiple, contradictory (in the Marxian sense), and the subject of every other liberatory knowledge project. In actualizing this aspiration, Sandra Harding suggests that we employ Marxism as a model, but only after replacing the proletariat by women or feminists as the potentially ideal agents of knowledge. She points out that (1987c: 292-3):

Marxism reformulated (the) Enlightenment vision so that the proletariat, guided by Marxist theory and by class struggle, became the ideal knowers, the group capable of using observation and reason to grasp the true form of social relations, including our relations with nature. This Marxist successor to bourgeois science was, like its predecessor, to provide one social group -- here, the proletariat -- with the knowledge and power to lead the rest of the species toward emancipation. Marxism's epistemology is grounded in a theory of labor rather than a theory of innate (masculine) faculties; so just as not all human faculties are equal in the bourgeois version, here not

all labor is equal. It was through struggle in the workplace that the proletariat would generate knowledge. In neither socialist practice nor Marxist theory were any women ever conceptualized as fundamentally defined by their relation to the mode of production...The (standpoint feminist epistemology) is grounded in a successor theory of labor, or rather, of distinctively human activity, and seek to substitute women or feminists (the accounts differ) for the proletariat as the potentially ideal agents of knowledge.

This rendering fully explicates how standpoint theory picks up where Marxist analysis has left.

Nancy Hartsock further elaborates on how standpoint theory should draw upon the experiences of the proletariat "to understand phallogratic domination." It is only by drawing upon the analytically rigorous explanation of class oppression can we start to comprehend gender oppression. She specifically argues that (1987: 158-9):

(L)ike the lives of the proletarians according to Marxian theory, women's lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy, a vantage point which can ground a powerful critique of the phallogratic institutions and ideology which constitute the capitalist form of patriarchy...the sexual division of labor forms the basis of such a standpoint and...on the basis of the structures which define women's activity as contributors to subsistence and as mothers one could begin, though not complete, the construction of such an epistemological tool...Just as Marx's understanding of the world from the standpoint of the proletariat enabled him to go beneath bourgeois ideology, so a feminist standpoint can allow us to understand patriarchal institutions and ideologies as perverse inversions of more humane relations.

Hence humane relations once more come to the forefront of the feminist reinterpretation of Marxist analysis. This reinterpretation does indeed bring historical materialism into the twentieth century as women replace the proletariat as the possible vanguards of the new order. Yet, given the power inequalities that still persist among women and across the world, we still need to further reinterpret Marxist analysis for the twenty-first century: we can only do so by bringing in all the dispossessed -- including the materially, sexually, and regionally dispossessed -- to be the pioneers of a liberatory new order.

In her most recent work, Sandra Harding does indeed pay particular attention to the African American and Third World criticisms of the feminist discourse. She argues that we need to study in more depth how "the development of Western sciences and models of knowledge are embedded in and have advanced the development of Western society but have also led to the simultaneous de-development and continual re-creation of 'others' -- third world peoples, women, the poor, nature" (Harding 1991: ix). She then proceeds to elaborate on her approach by pointing out that only through bringing in the standpoints of the oppressed and the dispossessed, only by taking (Harding 1991: x) "the standpoint of the lives of groups that have not been central to Western feminist discussions of science and epistemology (let alone dominant discourses)...(can) liberatory movements hasten the 'birthing' of new agents of history and knowledge." Hence Harding expands the feminist standpoint to the "others," as she defines them.

Yet is such a declaration sufficient? Harding's discussion of the others' standpoints does not progress beyond her solemn advice to First-world white feminists that they give space to the standpoints of the others. She merely states that "it is necessary to decenter white, middle-class, heterosexual, Western women in Western feminist thought and yet still generate feminist analyses from the perspective of women's lives" (Harding 1991: 13). The assumption hidden here is that once we can detect, in scientific practice, the androcentric or Eurocentric beliefs and practices as part of evidence for one hypothesis over another, then we can automatically eliminate them. Dorothy Smith (1987b: 86) engages in the same wishful thinking⁷ when she asserts that the unequal relationship between

⁷ Although I must say that Dorothy Smith admits that this consequence is possible, but not inevitable. She explicitly states that (1987b: 86):

(T)he institutions which lock sociology into the structures occupied by men are the same institutions which lock women into the situations in which they find

the two worlds and the two bases of knowledge and experience, that of sociology versus that of women's everyday experience, would unravel as soon as the institutions that produce this inequality are identified. Hence, once more, feminist standpoint theory seems to assume that when we understand and unearth the inequality, we automatically become empowered to eliminate it. But the elimination process is not that simple. The critical works of Black feminists and Third-world writers caution us not to share the optimism of Dorothy Smith and Sandra Harding; these works depict, time and again, the persistence of such hegemonies, of structures of domination, long after their successful identification by the oppressed groups.

Patricia Hill Collins and the Articulation of the Matrix of Oppression

The critique by minority women of the insights provided by feminist theory revolves around the issue of power, in this case power associated with white, heterosexual, middle-class women at the expense of "other" women. Indeed, the minority feminist perspective problematizes the intersection of gender, class and race. It demonstrates, in particular, how ideological practice and social structure combine to produce the triple oppression of poor, non-white women. Black feminists⁸ in particular utilize the feminist standpoint theory to study how this triple oppression works in the contemporary U.S. society. Patricia Collins (1991) and bell hooks (1989) develop a matrix of domination whereby, in the case of Black women, race, class and gender emerge as the three systems of oppression that most heavily affect them. bell hooks (1989: 175) refers to this matrix of

themselves oppressed. To unlock the latter leads logically to an unlocking of the former.

⁸ Patricia Collins states, for example, how significant this theory was for her to establish her agency as a Black woman in a society that totally segregated her. Through the standpoint theory, she was able to unite her experience with those of other Black women. So, she states (1991: xii) that "the voice (she) now seeks is both individual and collective, personal and political, one reflecting the intersection of (her) unique biography with the larger meaning of (her) historical times."

domination as "the ideological ground that the (dominant) share, which is a belief in domination, a belief in the notions of superior and inferior, which are the components of all those systems." Collins further articulates these multiple levels of domination when she states that (1991: 227):

People experience and resist oppression on three levels: the level of personal biography; the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, and gender; and the systemic level of social institutions. Black feminist thought emphasizes all three levels as sites of domination and as potential sites of resistance.

Modes of resisting the matrix of domination is what Collins elaborates upon in her work. "For the African-American women," she argues (1991: 10), "the knowledge gained at the intersection of race, gender, and class oppression provides the stimulus for crafting and passing on the subjugated knowledge of a Black women's culture of resistance." For Collins, Afrocentric consciousness, though inadequately elaborated, is the result of this self-conscious, self-defined struggle. And it is this self-defined standpoint that stimulates resistance among the oppressed group of Black women in particular, and other oppressed groups in general. Hence, the analyses of Black women introduce, for the first time, into feminist theory the concept of empowerment through resistance. Patricia Hill Collins also strives for a universal, humanist vision⁹ when she identifies the Black women's struggles as a "a part of a wider struggle for human dignity and development" (1991: 37). What is crucial for an ensuing liberatory stand is the revelation of new sources of knowledge for the oppressed, and also the exploration of new ways of knowing. Black women, Collins (1991: 202) argues, need to use different sources, "alternative sites such as music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior as important locations for articulating the core themes of a Black

⁹ Collins develops an interesting distinction between knowledge and wisdom, with experience as the cutting edge dividing them. Wisdom is what the oppressed need and have to survive the oppression they undergo: "Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate" (Collins 1991: 208).

feminist consciousness." Ultimately, what Collins advocates is a multiplicity of visions similar to the one Elsa Barkley Brown (1989: 921) presents as enveloping "a variety of experiences, a variety of ways of understanding the world, a variety of frameworks of operation, without imposing consciously or unconsciously a notion of the norm."

Yet, once more, even as we expand gender oppression to include race and class, what we are presented with is a desire for the future, a longing for a multiplicity of voices. This objective does not then translate into an attempt to identify the processes and institutions that would specifically enhance or curb such a multi-vocal expression. How can we secure the multiple sites of experience once we have identified them? Black feminists also do not adequately answer this question. We would argue that we can gain significant insights into this problematic by analyzing yet another site of experience, that emerging from the Western colonial oppression of the Third-world by the West. Such an analysis can alert us to the complexity and the tenacious persistence of oppression.

From the Women's Experience to the Third World: Edward Said and Subaltern Studies

Third-World critiques of Western oppression demonstrate how difficult it is to eradicate oppression even after one successfully identifies it. Edward Said (1978, 1983, 1992) in particular portrays the tenacity with which the West still maintains the oppression of the Third-world which it started in the seventeenth century. He argues that even when one identifies and analyzes this Western hegemony, one still cannot reduce it, let alone eliminate it. Instead, by doing so, one unwittingly often partakes in the reproduction of the hegemony. There is a lesson to be drawn from this observation for a new interpretation of historical materialism: in addition to locating and identifying the nature of oppression, we

need to trace it to its social structural origins to expose its ties with the rest of society. Third-World critiques thus alert us how culture and social structure interact to reproduce the hegemony of the West. What differentiates Western oppression from class, gender, race oppression is that the historical conditions which produced it have been extensively analyzed in Said's works through the concept of Orientalism, a concept which historical depicts the complex process through which, and the tenacity with which Western oppression diffuses to the rest of the world, and, in the process, also reproduces itself.

Edward Said and the Politics of Western Oppression Said's current conception of Orientalism is located, like the scientific discourse, in late eighteenth century Enlightenment. He argues that (1978: 3)

as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient -- dealing with it, making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient...(W)ithout examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage -- and even produce -- the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.

What is of particular significance in this quote for our purposes is the emphasis on the *complexity* of the mode of oppression and domination. Said continuously reiterates (1978: 6), throughout his narrative, the unique resilience of Orientalist discourse, "(its) sheer knitted-together strength..., its very close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political institutions, and its redoubtable durability."¹⁰ Once formed, Orientalism penetrates into all aspects and dimensions of human existence. It is through the articulation of this point can we

¹⁰ After all, Said continues, "any system of ideas that can remain unchanged from the period of Ernest Renan in the 1840s until the present in the United States must be something more formidable than a mere collection of lies. Orientalism ...is a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment."

gain insights into the obstacles that the dominant groups would produce to quench the multiple sites of experience. Said argues that (1978: 7):

'Under the general heading of knowledge of the Orient, and within the umbrella of Western hegemony over the Orient during the period from the end of the eighteenth century, there emerged a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial, and historical theses about mankind and the universe, for instances of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personality, religious and national character.

As Western oppression spreads through the entire social system like a giant wave, it affects all aspects of the human experience. What makes Western oppression in the form of Orientalism tenacious is its diffusion into the pores of society. By analyzing the mode of this diffusion, we can gain insights into the origins of the multiple sites of oppression that exist in contemporary society. Said notes (1978: 12) that

(O)rientalism... (is) a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction... but also of a whole series of "interests" which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world... Indeed, my real argument is that Orientalism is... a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with "our" world.

Once made aware of the tenacious hold of the complex forms of oppression over us, Said then explicates the complexity of the historical process of disempowerment, and, once disempowered, of the immense difficulties one encounters in restoring agency. The mode in which this oppression reproduces itself is particularly noteworthy: the oppressed themselves accept the Orientalist categories as truths about themselves and uphold it in the name of indigenous nationalism. We can

easily draw parallels to how class, gender, race oppression have similar complex, diffuse, tenacious roots in the social structure that need to be disclosed.

What, then, does Said suggest to resist, to counter this oppression? It is only in his most recent work that Said starts to articulate the concept of resistance. He argues that (1993: xii):

Yet it was the case nearly everywhere in the non-European world that the coming of the white man brought forth some sort of resistance...Along with armed resistance in places as diverse as nineteenth-century Algeria, Ireland, and Indonesia, there also went considerable efforts in cultural resistance almost everywhere, the assertion of nationalist identities, and, in the political realm, the creation of associations and parties whose common goal was self-determination and national independence. Never was it the case that the imperial encounter pitted an active Western intruder against a supine or inert non-Western native; there was *always* some form of active resistance, and in the overwhelming majority of cases, the resistance finally won out.

Yet how, as a sociologist, can we empirically reach the sites of this resistance? Said suggests the use of stories (1993: xii-xiii) which are "at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history." Yet he then proceeds to argue that the illustration which emerges from such an empirical analysis is a gloomy and often discouraging one, one that often is unable to escape the cycle of Western oppression. When thinking about a possible venue for social liberation, Said joins the aspirations of Dorothy Smith, Sandra Harding and Patricia Collins as he argues that what tempers this oppression is the possible "emergence of a new intellectual and political conscience" (1993: xxiv) that challenges generalizations and binary oppositions, and advocates viewing society and power relations in a more historical, processual, and critical mode. Although Said meticulously documents how oppression becomes

culturally constructed, we are, once more, left with hopes, introspection, and self-criticism.¹¹

Subaltern Studies and the Politics of Colonial Repression The empirical analyses undertaken by subaltern studies provide us with the only insight into how to proceed in restoring the agency of the oppressed. Sen (1987: 203-4) defines subaltern as a term used to "denote the entire people that is subordinate in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office, or in any other way." Hence we are provided, for the first time, with a concept that expands the oppressed beyond the boundaries of class, gender, race and region. By then studying the creation and reproduction of Western colonial domination in India, the subalternists delve into the multiple levels of consciousness through which oppression implants itself.

The first emancipatory act that they provide is "to restore to subaltern groups their historical being" (Das 1989: 314). Once the colonized subject is analyzed more in terms of its multiple confrontations with the colonial power, and once these confrontations are defined in terms of the symbol systems of the colonized rather than the colonizer, then and only then, the subalternist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues (1987: 197), "is the agency of change located in the insurgent or the subaltern." It is thus through this concurrent assessment of the standpoints of the colonizer and the colonized that subalternists approach oppression. The empirical model that they provide for such an approach seems to be mostly the textual reinterpretation of the colonial discourse. As Chatterjee articulates (1983: 310)

¹¹ Richard Fox (1992: 146), in his critique of Said, argues that Said's account "remains a history of Orientalism from the West and affirms in the very way it is set out the categories of West and East it ostensibly attacks. It also does not allow the possibility that Orientals, once Orientalized by Western domination, could use Orientalism itself against that domination."

(I)n so far as that knowledge (on economic and political conditions) has a history, the gaps have a history too. In fact it was the same history that produced both the knowledge -- enshrined in archival documents -- and the gaps which the same documents also contain.

Hence, we are alerted to search for and interpret the silences in the texts, the silences that often contain the agency of the colonized. This subaltern reinterpretation of oppression through an empirical textual analysis of the multiple sites of the confrontation between the colonizer and the colonized leads us to the possible solutions to the structure/agency problem. In countering the structuralist interpretation of historical materialism, most of the scholars we have analyzed suggest a textual reinterpretation, a mode of analysis advocated by postmodernism.

Hence, at this juncture we can start to explore the possible theoretical solutions in restoring the agency of the oppressed and in preserving their multiple sites of experience. Postmodernism and a new historical materialism that redefines social structure emerges as the only viable possible solutions to this problem.

Solution I: Postmodernism and Relativity in Oppression

The fundamental dichotomies of the Enlightenment thought, dichotomies such as rational/irrational, subject/object provide the epistemological basis of the postmodern critique (Hekman 1990: 1-2). Postmodernists argue that these dichotomies chose a rational, objective formulation over the rest of human experience and then legitimated this choice under the rubric of science. By making such a choice, however, this formulation favored the experience of the social groups which created and supported it at the expense of all the others it marginalized. Using the postmodern approach, Susan Bordo demonstrates, for instance, how women's agency was destroyed by the Cartesian thought that formed the epistemological foundation of the current social sciences. She studies

(1987: 247-8) Descartes's *Meditations* to demonstrate the instability, the dark underside to the "bold rationalist vision...based on clarity, dispassion, and detachment." According to her, the great Cartesian anxiety that emerges is due the drastic Enlightenment separation from the organic female universe of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The Cartesian reconstruction of the world during the Enlightenment is thus a defiant gesture of independence from the female cosmos. Yet, as Bordo demonstrates, and as we can surmise today, this independence from the "female," the "natural" comes at a great cost. The mutual opposition of the spiritual and the corporeal replaces reason with belief and turns the formerly female earth into "inert, dead, mechanically interacting matter...Emphatic, associational; or emotional response (is seen as obscuring) objectivity, feeling for nature (is perceived as muddying) the clear lake of the mind" (Bordo 1987: 260-1). Current scientific thought, by embracing the rational method, dehumanizes the subjects and abandons the complex, the passionate, and the caring as "unscientific."

The textual analyses that postmodernism engages in do indeed capture the complexity of human experience and also do successfully locate the silences. Yet, even though it presents a well-placed critique of existing epistemologies, postmodernism still fails to come up with an alternative formulation. Since it argues that power diffuses into society through texts to fragment and particularize social relationships, all our concepts become problematized and to appear in quotes, as does "oppression." If we take this theoretical position to its conclusion, however, all oppression becomes relative and incomparable. This article argues that the postmodern explanation of the discursive processes by which humans gain understanding of their world is therefore necessary for sociological analysis, but not sufficient. Such a discursive approach alerts us to the interaction of experience, action and structure, but, at the same time, privileges the perspective

of the scholar doing the explanation. The conscious theoretical stand of not replacing the discarded Enlightenment epistemology with another one eliminates the hegemony of objectivity but, in doing so, unfortunately introduces the larger problem of relativity immobilizes our capacity to challenge the existing power hegemonies in society.

Postmodernism privileges those that already have power in society, those who are, in the contemporary world, located in the West. Third-world criticisms of postmodernism starkly illustrate the missing analysis of power relationships. As Samir Amin points out (1989: 153)

The view that any person has the right -- and even the power -- to judge others is replaced by attention to the relativity of those judgements. Without a doubt, such judgements can be erroneous, superficial, hasty, or relative. No case is ever definitely closed; debate always continues. But that is precisely the point. It is necessary to pursue debate and not to avoid it on the grounds that the views that anyone forms about others are and always will be false... (t)he claim is made that only Europeans can truly understand Europe, Chinese China, Christians Christianity, and Moslems Islam; the Eurocentrism of one group is completed by the inverted Eurocentrism of others.

Hence postmodernism inadvertently reproduces oppression. One can take Amin's point even further to argue that this "inverted Eurocentrism" not only leads to oppression within the Third-world, but also reproduces and sustains the current world status quo that favors the West. Postmodernism thus becomes a conservative ideology that purposefully identifies and reproduces the existing power structure.

Solution II: A New Historical Materialism

A new interpretation of historical materialism can provide us with a possible venue to study the experience of the oppressed. We can combine class, gender, race, and Western oppression into a single category of oppression, and redefine, through the concept of reflexivity, the connection between the subject's

experience of the social structure and the Marxist conception of the structure itself. Structuration theory provides an extensive discussion of the complex relationship human agency, social action and social structure (see, in particular, Giddens 1984, 1976), effectively eliminating the rigid causal dichotomy¹² between structure and agency. According to Anthony Giddens (1976: 121), the nature of human agency is such that it both constitutes social structure and is, at the same time, the medium of this constitution. Succinctly put, every act of production is also an act of reproduction: human agency itself is reflexively and recursively implicated in social structure. The theoretical boundaries among experience, action and structure erode when we reread Giddens's (1984: 25) following depiction of agents and structures:

The constitution of agents and structures are not two independently given sets of phenomena; a dualism, but represent a duality. According to the notion of the duality of structure, the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize. Structure is not "external" to the individuals.

It is this complex interconnectedness which can theoretically enrich the notion of subject's experience to include both domination and resistance. In Giddens's structuration theory (Thompson 1989: 59), unacknowledged conditions and the unintended consequences of action influence one another through reflexive monitoring, rationalization and motivation of action. Applied to the subject's

¹² Note how similar the following statement by Giddens (1989: 296) on the nature of "scientific" research is similar to Smith's criticism of a sociology hegemonized by male-centric "objective" facts:

(F)or instance, it is a logical feature of social research...that all research endeavors have an ethnographic or "anthropological" aspect to them. Since this is a logical point, by definition it does not disclose anything directly which is an option for a researcher; it sets out what all social investigation, without exception, involves. Yet it would be wrong to say that it is without direct relevance to the conduct and interpretation of research. Thus someone who believes she or he is dealing only with "hard facts"...might both misconstrue what those "facts" are and other conclusions drawn from them, if the point is ignored.

experience, this theoretical interpretation implies that the totality of the experience can only be captured by going from the standpoint of the experience to structure and back to the subject's experience of the structure.

Subject's Experience as a Liberatory Struggle Against Oppression

This new interpretation of historical materialism brings in the subject's experience to recapture the human agency. It then introduces the concept of reflexivity to reach the experience of all oppressed groups through and in spite of the social structure. Only then can historical materialism capture the contradictory tensions of domination/resistance, only then can we understand why oppression persists throughout the world, and only then can we come up with a successful liberatory model against oppression. Yet, this article is obviously just the beginning of such a theoretical endeavor.

At this juncture, we cannot produce any conclusions beyond the visions of two standpoint theorists, Sandra Harding and Nancy Hartsock; on where such reflexivity could possibly lead us. On the one hand, Sandra Harding discusses the new vision of this reflexivity can produce. She argues that (1991: 163):

A notion of strong reflexivity would require that the objects of inquiry be conceptualized as gazing back in all their cultural particularity and that the researcher, through theory and methods, stand behind them, gazing back at his own socially situated research project in all its cultural particularity and its relationships to other projects of his culture -- many of which...can be seen only from locations far away from the scientist's actual daily work.

On the other hand, Nancy Hartsock provides an insight into how to recover the entire (rather than male) spectrum of the subject's experience of oppression (1987: 164):

The feminist standpoint which emerges through an examination of women's activities is related to the proletarian standpoint, but deeper going. Women and workers inhabit a world in which the emphasis is on change rather than stasis, a world characterized by interaction with natural substances rather than separation from nature, a world in which quality is more important than quantity, a world in which the unification of mind and body is inherent in the activities

performed. Yet, there are some important differences, differences marked by the fact that the proletarian (if male) is immersed in this world only during the time his labor power is used by the capitalist. If, to paraphrase Marx, we follow the worker home from the factory, we can once again perceive a change in the *dramatis personae*. He who before followed behind as the worker, timid and holding back, with nothing to expect but a hiding, now strides in front while a third person, not specifically present in Marx's account of the transaction between capitalist and worker (both of whom are male) follows timidly behind, carrying groceries, baby, and diapers.

This portrayal captures the different trajectories of experience men and women often go through which our new interpretation possibly captures through its reflexive mode.

In concluding the possible ways through which to map out this new interpretation, we are left with Hillary Rose's (1987: 265) call for once more bringing together, in scholarly research, "the hand, brain, and the heart," as Marx and Engels once did a century ago. Only then can we reach a new scientific knowledge and technology that will enable humanity to live in harmony.

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