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# Thinking Sex Materially: Marxist, Socialist, and Related Feminist Approaches

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## INTRODUCTION

Why does materialism matter for how feminist theory understands sexuality? The simplest answer is that materialism, and specifically the philosophy of historical materialism, aims to explain the world in order to transform it. Feminist approaches to sexuality draw upon materialist perspectives because they share a basic premise: theories of social life that begin with what humans need to survive are best able to foster actions to redress injustice. Historical materialism recognizes that the process of meeting survival needs and intervening in their unjust organization entails relations that are economic, political and cultural. As a historical discourse that is a component of culture, sexuality is an integral feature of social life. Materialist theories of sexuality recognize that sexuality is one way that human capacities for sensation and affiliation, psychic identification and desire are made meaningful, and as such it is intimately involved in shaping subjects and power relations. It is

also a potent technology for securing relations of power across practices and institutions to a variety of social and political ends.

There are several feminist understandings of materialism that differently inflect how sexuality is understood, and I address them in a long note at the end of the chapter.<sup>1</sup> Because feminist theories of sexuality draw upon the efforts of pioneering women and men who insisted on the importance of sexuality to socialism's materialist perspective, the chapter begins with a brief history of some nineteenth- and early twentieth-century socialist free thinkers whose ideas on sexuality shook up western Marxism. I then consider the historical flashpoint of the 1970s, when feminist theory came into its own and a historical materialist paradigm deeply informed feminist debates on sexuality. The next section focuses on the cultural turn in the late twentieth century when feminist theory more profoundly probed the question 'what exactly constitutes the material history of sexuality?' I then address queer theory's powerful contribution to sexuality studies,

especially as it draws upon materialist feminist critiques of neoliberal capitalism's investments in sexualized bodies, subjects and politics. In the chapter's final section I gesture toward new directions in feminist studies that are returning to historical materialist concepts to advance a better understanding of sexuality as a value-producing component of capitalism, a technology of imperial projects and commodity cultures and an affect-laden feature of organized struggles toward social alternatives.

### SOCIALISTS AND SEX RADICALS

It is not hard to see why sexuality became a political issue for feminists in the nineteenth century, given the enormous effort that went into policing women's reproductive capacity, sexual activity and desire (Jackson and Scott, 1996: 3). However, feminist campaigns in the developing world were constrained by the material circumstances in which generations of women lived, with limited opportunities for economic independence and control of their fertility and the prevailing sexual morality. Socialist theory that situated women's oppression within a materialist framework was most famously elaborated by Friedrich Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1970). He argues that the sexual division of labor is rooted in the emergence of private property as women's bodies and sexuality came under the control of men, and he predicts that women's full emancipation will arrive only with the socialization of housework and childrearing. In the socialist movements of the Second International (1889–1914), Engels' arguments went unquestioned.

The Russian socialist Alexandra Kollontai was a rare exception. She argued that the sexual problem cannot be solved unless there is reform of the human psyche and in turn a transformation in basic socio-economic relations. She called for materialist analysis of the historically varied forms of love and sexuality and for continued social and economic

struggles to simultaneously address the structure of gender and sexual relations (Kollontai, 1977). Against the grain of middle-class women's purity campaigns, she claimed that the only way to end prostitution was to eliminate the conditions that compel women to seek out sex work as a way to survive.

The early twentieth century was a pivotal time when the woman question in socialism was highly contested, dismissed by some as premature or divisive and promoted by others as fundamental. Over the course of the following decades, feminists who aligned with socialist principles would challenge the limits of Marxist theory and the refusals of socialist political organizers to include women's concerns in their agendas. The efforts of these early socialist feminists to address sexuality were shaped by the contradictory situation of women in the industrialized sectors of the world. Women were being recruited into wage labor and a modernizing urban life that loosened the grip of patriarchal control over their bodies, minds and movement at the same time as they were confronting the persistence of that control at home and in the public sphere.<sup>2</sup>

As the historian Mari Jo Buhle argues, the topic of women's sexual emancipation brought turn-of-the-century socialists to a crossroads. In the United States and Europe two camps on the question of women's sexuality emerged: those who defended pure womanhood, opposed prostitution and launched social purity campaigns that targeted 'white slavery' and temperance; and those who fought for women's sexual freedom and reproductive rights (Buhle, 1981: 256–87). Some of the latter group were followers of sex theorists such as Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis; others moved in circles with early modernists such as Crystal Eastman, Mabel Dodge Luhan and Dora Russell, or supported the ideas of women's reproductive rights advocates, among them Elizabeth Gurley Flynn in the US and Stella Browne in the UK, who refused to disconnect these issues from the labor movement.<sup>3</sup>

The nineteenth-century free love movement was an antecedent of sex radicalism. It emerged from the utopian socialism of the 1820s and 1830s and influenced the anarchists and sex radicals of the 1890s and the birth control movement of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> By the early twentieth century many women who were also socialists were taking up the banner of sexual freedom and promoting 'free love' as part of a broader campaign for women's rights.<sup>5</sup> Among free thinkers, the sex radicals were distinguished from feminists because they saw the feminist focus on suffrage to be at the expense of emancipating women's 'true nature'. Figures such as the anarchist Emma Goldman voiced the sex radical free-thinker position in opposing the institution of marriage not because it impinged upon women's rights but because it stifled women's passion and capacity for erotic love (Goldman, 1970; Gornick, 2011: 70).

Capital expansion in the twentieth century took place through the violent militarization of two world wars and the growth of a global military-industrial complex; the restructuring of colonialism; a widespread attack on labor movements; and the intensification of consumer culture. The advancing modernization that followed in its wake provoked sweeping cultural changes that registered in adjustments to the meanings of gender, sexuality and race. Between the wars the woman question and sexual politics that had once been pressure points in radical circles on the Left were marginalized and, by the Great Depression years of the 1930s, they were almost completely subsumed under class issues. In the United States radical voices such as Mary Inman's were rare. Her *In Women's Defense* (1940) challenged Popular Front conventions that reaffirmed bourgeois conceptions of women's sexuality (Rabinowitz, 1991: 5). However, as Paula Rabinowitz's work on the 1930s reveals, popular fiction was one outlet for radical women writers. In the work of Tillie Olsen, Agnes Smedley and Mary McCarthy sexuality was often a battleground in which a narrative of class

struggle and women's efforts to establish an intellectual voice were played out against the pull of psychiatry and motherhood (Rabinowitz, 1991). Mid-century western Marxist intellectuals, many concerned with the political and social implications of the Holocaust, turned their attention to rethinking the path to social transformation and the role of sexual culture in it. Among them were the Austrian Wilhelm Reich, whose controversial experiments and writings, such as *The Sexual Revolution* (1936), ultimately met with state repression and censorship after he moved to New York to escape the Nazis. The Cold War kept activism by sex radicals and feminists in check or underground, but several leading intellectuals did pioneering work that left a lasting legacy. In the late 1940s and early 1950s Alfred Kinsey was publishing his empirical research on *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1998) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Kinsey et al., 1953). The wide range of human sexual practices his studies disclosed provoked considerable public controversy and hinted at a brewing sexual revolution. Two other landmark works of this era are Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1952, rpt. 1989), which undid the biological foundation of womanhood and became a touchstone for an emerging new stream of feminist thought, and Herbert Marcuse's synthesis of Marx and Freud in *Eros and Civilization* (1966, rpt. 1974), which was embraced by sex radicals and activists in the 1960s. For the most part, however, the public debates that women's sexual emancipation had provoked in the early twentieth century would simmer after the war, erupting in the 1960s to drive a wedge into feminist and socialist orthodoxies in the New Left.

## SEX AND CAPITALIST PATRIARCHY

The upsurge of sexual liberation in the 1960s coincided with world-wide uprisings in

which feminists and others embraced Marxist concepts as a powerful guide to revolution. In heated theoretical discussions lines were being drawn between a socialism that was focused on economic and colonial injustice, a youthful rebellion that was more individualized and attentive to sexual and cultural politics, and the ideas of a marginal few who saw the divide between economics and culture as a hurdle to be overcome by a materialist analysis of sexuality under capitalism. Sexuality featured prominently in feminist redefinitions of 'the personal as political' in consciousness-raising groups and in critiques of patriarchy that feminists around the world placed on a political agenda that included sexuality among other issues that had previously been seen as private.

During these energized and frenzied years, the theoretical and political lines between radical feminism and socialist and marxist feminism were more blurred than later accounts might suggest. Many feminists turned to the ideas of sex radicals from earlier generations. Margaret Sanger's autobiography was re-issued in 1970, as was Emma Goldman's, and in 1972 the US feminist Alex Kates Shulman published a collection of Goldman's writings and speeches. That same year Eleanor Leacock's now classic introduction to Engels' *Origins of the Family* was published. Works such as Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) indicate the degree to which feminists who ultimately broke from Marxism nonetheless were engaged in thinking through how historical materialism might advance a better understanding of sexuality as a social rather than a natural phenomenon. Feminist analyzes of sexuality in the early years of the New Left also were being formulated out of alliances that traversed the Black Power movement, student and labor movements and the liberation struggles in Vietnam, China and Cuba that both took for granted and recast certain Marxist assumptions. Although the New Left devoted considerable attention to capital investments in ideology and non-market relations, many

efforts to advance a more ample politics ignored women's interests and the topic of sexuality. Much of the most important theoretical work of this period was the result of women's efforts to redress this neglect by taking into account the relationship of patriarchy to capitalism.

Marxist feminist scholars working in and outside the university in the 1970s conducted cross-cultural and historical studies of earlier forms of kinship and the role of gender in the division of labor (Leacock, 1972; Reed, 1970; Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974). Their analyzes cleared the way for theories of sexuality as a component of social reproduction.<sup>6</sup> In 1975 Gayle Rubin published her essay 'The Traffic in Women', which put forward a materialist and structuralist analysis of the 'sex-gender system'. Her formulation de-naturalized sex and gender in a manner that emphasized their integral relation to one another and offered a concept that would profoundly influence feminist theory, even though the essay's effort to align historical materialism and theories of kinship never quite coheres.<sup>7</sup> A decade later, her essay 'Thinking Sex' would pursue a sexual libertarian stance and leave behind her earlier argument that sexuality is an integral feature of social reproduction, broadly understood.<sup>8</sup> By the end of the decade, materialist efforts to theorize sexuality were blossoming. The first issue of the socialist feminist journal *Feminist Review*, which appeared in 1979, featured Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh's elaboration of Christine Delphy's concept of materialist feminism. It was followed three years later by a special issue on sexuality featuring many facets of sexual politics that the Women's Liberation movement had made visible.

During these years feminists pursued materialist analysis in theoretical work that was propelled by a sense of urgency and an awareness of devising theoretical paradigms with direct ties to social movements that were themselves charged sites of debate over concepts. Lisa Vogel aptly characterizes the consequent theoretical divisions within

Marxist and socialist feminism in terms of two approaches (1995: 23–9). One focused on two parallel systems that fuel the development of history: the class struggle and the sex struggle. The other, more closely aligned with Marxism, took the position that social reproduction is the central dynamic of history. Here ‘reproduction’ refers to the entire process of domestic labor, exchange and consumption, as well as the cultural and political structures that accompany them. Both approaches would shape theories of sexuality throughout the decade. The first evolved into a conceptual framework that supported parallel movements focused on women, sexuality and race, and eventually morphed into an identity politics that had little relation to materialism. The latter would re-emerge as a valuable theoretical standpoint for materialist investigations in the new millennium.

In the early phase of these debates socialist feminists formulated what came to be called ‘dual systems theory’, an approach that situated sexuality within the social relations of both patriarchy and capitalism. Dual systems theory has been critiqued for, and some would say it has since been abandoned because of, its failure to enable analysis of capitalism and patriarchy that is both sufficiently general and specific. What remains significant about this work, however, is its effort to think sexuality in relation to capitalist and patriarchal organizations of social life. Central to these debates was the concept of ‘capitalist patriarchy’, which appeared in the work of many feminist scholars. It is evident in the Egyptian feminist Nawal El-Saadawi’s introduction to the English translation of her book *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980) where she refers to class domination and men’s domination as the principal problems women face.<sup>9</sup> Two US collections from that time that focused on debates over the dual systems perspective are *Women and Revolution*, edited by Lydia Sargent (1981), and *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, edited by Zillah Eisenstein (1979).

The Sargent collection is organized around a series of responses to an essay entitled ‘The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism’ by Heidi Hartmann, earlier drafts of which appeared in 1975. Hartmann maps out some of the premises of historical materialism as they conceptualize the material base of patriarchal control over women’s labor power and sexuality. While she does not overcome the impasses in this ‘unhappy marriage’, she does call for continued theoretical work to make patriarchy a more robust analytic category, and she encourages feminists to turn to Marxism as a well-developed theory of social change. The Eisenstein collection has two essays specifically focused on sexuality. One, by Linda Gordon, offers a history of feminist struggles for birth control; the other, by Nancy Chodorow, draws upon Gayle Rubin’s concept of the sex–gender system to theorize the sexual politics of mothering.

*Capitalist Patriarchy* also includes four collective statements, one of which, the Combahee River Collective statement, first published in 1977, is a notable example of theorizing by US black feminists that addresses sexuality as a key component of socialist feminism.<sup>10</sup> Members of the collective had been meeting since 1974 and working on projects addressing sterilization abuse, abortion rights, rape and health care. They assert that their position is socialist ‘because we believe the work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products and not for the profit of the bosses’, and they call for a ‘feminist and antiracist revolution’ that takes into account the specific class situation of black women (Eisenstein, 1979: 366). Like other socialist feminists, they acknowledge a debt to Marxist theory but argue that it needs to be reworked to address the specific situation of black women. They call attention to sexuality as always racialized and reject lesbian separatism as a viable strategy because it ‘negate[s] the facts of class and race’ (Eisenstein, 1979: 367). Also in this collection is a history of the Marxist Feminist

groups 1–5 which notes the attention they gave to sexuality, including norms defining legitimate and illegitimate sex, birth control and the systematic sterilization imposed by the US government on Puerto Rican, Native American and other third world women.

Some feminist theorists, among them Rosalind Coward and Ann Foreman, integrated the insights of psychoanalysis into a historical and materialist feminist approach. Ann Ferguson's *Blood at the Root: Motherhood, Sexuality, and Male Dominance* (1989) is a socialist feminist argument that draws upon this work to theorize what she calls 'sex-affective production', a system of production of human desires connected to sexuality and love, centered in the household, but semi-autonomous from the capitalist economy. Following the post-Marxist theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theories of desire, and pursuing Gayle Rubin's concept of sex–gender systems, Ferguson argues that sexuality is a bodily energy that is socially produced and integrated into relations that meet human needs for social bonding. In contrast, Michèle Barrett's *Women's Oppression Today* (1980) is a Marxist feminist argument for understanding gender and sexuality as ideological cultural practices integral to the relations of production and reproduction in capitalism. In addition, she makes a case for acknowledging both the continuities and discontinuities between gender identity and sexual practice. Her approach is indebted to analyses of patriarchy developed in radical feminist writings and to the concepts of 'reproduction' and ideology in the work of the French Marxist Louis Althusser (Barrett, 1980: 10).

The absorption of feminism, ethnic studies and, eventually, sexuality into the academy was a key feature of globalization's commodification of difference in response to the threatening ruptures to capital that social movements against imperialism, patriarchal oppression and racism were posing. Student uprisings on campuses across the US, Europe and Latin America called for the university to be accountable to the needs of the people and

for structural changes in curriculum. The university answered by absorbing difference, institutionalizing diversity represented by segmented interest groups, and by establishing multicultural programs, thereby neutralizing the systemic analysis of radical critiques that tied cultural difference to class. Indeed, as Joan Sangster and Meg Luxton so aptly point out, in the ensuing years 'class was often named but remained a theoretical ghost, an absent presence' (2013).

As feminism established a foothold in the academy and impacted public discourse the voices of women of color increasingly challenged the presumptive white and middle-class subject of feminism. One example of the ensuing debates is evident in Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh's 1985 response to black feminists' critiques of the racism in feminist theory and social movements. The exchanges published in the UK-based socialist feminist journal *Feminist Review* underscored the pitfalls of feminist paradigms that overlook racism and presume racially homogenous formulations of issues that have a bearing on sexuality, among them family, abortion and other reproductive rights.<sup>11</sup>

In the late 1960s through the early 1970s many grassroots gay and lesbian organizations understood homosexuality in relation to feminist and antiracist politics. From its founding in 1969 the Gay Liberation Front produced theoretical work that was deeply influenced by socialist thought and committed to forwarding coalition politics (R. Ferguson, 2012: 217).<sup>12</sup> Several groups saw sexuality as correlated with gender and the sexual division of labor and linked gay oppression under capitalism to the role of the family and the subjection of women. Few lesbian groups in the 1970s turned to Marxism, however, as most tended to identify patriarchy as the primary cause of women's oppression. Nonetheless, several, among them The Furies, based in Washington DC, did develop materialist critiques of heterosexuality as an institution and an ideology. In 1975, addressing a Socialist Feminist conference at Antioch College in Ohio, Furies

member Charlotte Bunch asserted that any politics aimed at confronting heterosexuality would have to be class politics. The class issue Bunch raised was axiomatic for many feminists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but tying it to heterosexuality was provocative (Bunch, 1987: 180). In 1978 Monique Wittig also sparked public controversy in the United States and France with her explosive assertion that 'lesbians are not women'.<sup>13</sup> Her critique situated 'lesbian' as a political standpoint that makes visible the violent regime of heterosexuality and refuses to be subjected to it (Turcotte, 1992). Unlike Adrienne Rich, whose essay 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980, rpt. 1994) would make a similar argument, Wittig called her position 'materialist'. The term signaled that her thinking was part of a broader feminist network in France, Canada and the United States that grew out of a critique of historical materialism. In her formulation, materialism meant that women's oppression and the regime of heterosexuality are not based in biology or nature but rather in social and historical institutions. Like Christine Delphy, she took Marxism to task for hiding the 'class conflict between men and women' and for not attending to what it means for members of oppressed classes to be subjects (Wittig, 1992: 18). In calling for a materialism that addresses subjectivity and sexuality, she rearticulated terms from a Marxist left that was increasingly turning to ideology as an 'imaginary' formulation and applied them to the category 'woman'.

### SEX PANICS AND THE CULTURAL TURN

The early 1980s were a pivotal period for feminism. The New Left was becoming incorporated into the professions and the historical forces that summoned it to attend primarily to culture were drawing more and more feminists away from the systemic analyzes of Marxist and socialist feminism.

Liberal feminism proved incapable of challenging the class divide between women. One symptomatic example in the US registered in the fact that both inside and outside the academy socialist feminist responses to the recruitment of middle-class women into the workforce were calling for socialized collective responsibility for childcare, but they were not the dominant voices in debates over sexuality (Sangster and Luxton, 2013).

Increasingly sexuality was being understood and debated in individualized terms as a practice and as pleasure discrete from labor and care, and gay activists were increasingly affirming homosexuality as a single issue discrete from race, gender or class. The sex panics of the 1980s largely consolidated this shift. They ranged over many topics, among them the regulation of pornography, legal protections for gay people, the scope of reproductive freedom for women and the content of safe-sex education. The 'sex wars' waged in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom drew battle lines between positions that emphasized sexual danger and those that argued for valorizing sexual pleasure. The first camp continued to embrace radical feminism's emphasis on women's oppression and sexual violence; unfortunately it joined feminist interests with the gathering forces of a radical Right waging anti-pornography campaigns. In the second camp were pro-sex supporters. While the debates suggest the degree to which sexuality was serving as a linchpin in the turn to cultural politics, they also generated important theoretical work, some of which advanced socialist feminist approaches.<sup>14</sup>

The 1982 Scholar and Feminist IX Conference 'Towards a Politics of Sexuality' held at Barnard College in New York City has been seen as a defining moment in pro-sex history. Its aim was 'to expand the analysis of pleasure' and 'create a movement that speaks as powerfully in favor of sexual pleasure as it does against sexual danger' (Vance, 1984: 3). The collection of papers from the conference includes authors such as Dorothy Allison, Amber Hollibaugh, Cherríe

Moraga and Hortense Spillers. Rubin's essay 'Thinking Sex', which appears here, challenges the assumption that feminism is or should be the privileged site of a theory of sexuality (Vance, 1984: 307). The introduction by the editor, Carole Vance, takes a more measured stance, acknowledging the continued importance to feminists of attention to the sexual dangers women confront and of theorizing women's pleasure. The absence of any socialist or Marxist feminist analysis in the volume would seem to imply that these analytical perspectives have fallen through the cracks between danger and pleasure.

However, the collection *Powers of Desire* (1984), edited by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson and published by *Monthly Review* the year after the Barnard Conference, demonstrates that socialist feminist analysis of sexuality was very much alive. The editors' introduction provides a broad descriptive history of socialism's concern with sex, and essays by Kathy Peiss and Allan Berubé link specific periods in capitalism's development to the emergence of sexual subjects. John D'Emilio's soon-to-become-classic essay 'Capitalism and Gay Identity' was first published here, tracing the appearance of homosexuals and the release of sexuality from a procreational mandate as capitalist wage labor expanded. The collection marks a significant development in socialist and Marxist approaches to sexuality in that it offers detailed analyses of the relation between changing sexual formations and historical adjustments in labor and capital mobility.

The end of the twentieth century ushered in a new phase in theorizing sexuality. As cultural materialism increasingly influenced academic feminist theory, research across disciplines pursued investigations of historical formations of sexuality.<sup>15</sup> When class was addressed it was often understood as social status or as a set of cultural practices that comprise one axis in the trinity of race, class and gender that by 1989 was defining the prevailing 'intersectional' methodology of academic women's studies, a paradigm that

either neglects class or replaces class analysis with analysis of class culture. Nonetheless, as feminism has taught us again and again, suppressed knowledges are not irretrievably lost. Although they were often marginalized, Marxist and socialist feminists did continue to investigate sexuality as a regulatory regime and a site of agency for gendered and racialized subjects in capitalism's class-based division of labor.

Important investigations of sexualized domestic labor were published in the mid-1980s, among them the German feminist Maria Mies's *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (1986), which links the historical processes of colonization and 'housewifization' that sexualized women as 'breeders' and 'consumers' in distinct yet related imperial formations. Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987) is another noteworthy materialist feminist publication from that period. Carby begins her readings of nineteenth-century black women writers with analyzes of two very different but interdependent sexual ideologies that operated upon white and black women in the antebellum US South. Mary Poovey's *Uneven Developments* (1988) also investigates sex and gender ideology, here in the context of emerging medical discourse and novelistic representations of sexualized labor in the Victorian family household.

Beginning in the 1980s, in part as a response to capital's intensified invasion of bodies and subjects, intellectuals increasingly attended to what came to be called 'bio-politics' and its role in the construction of sex and sexuality. The work of Michel Foucault led the way and profoundly influenced evolving materialist feminist approaches to sexuality. The English translation of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, volume I (1978) provoked an avalanche of theoretical work that pursued his argument that the gradual deployment of sexual discourses installed new forms of disciplinary power exercised through norms and 'technologies' of the subject. Foucault's genealogical approach to history and to power

abandoned the theoretical pre-suppositions of his Marxist teachers, principally the notion that class relations have some determining force in binding propertied interests to prevailing ideas and cultures. Foucauldian materialism sees power as a diffuse set of force relations that operate through norms and forms of governmentality to which there is no necessary class logic and no stable 'outside' from which to launch a transformative opposition. In this analytic, sexuality is continually enmeshed in relations of power.

Despite Foucault's neglect of gender, feminist approaches to sexuality were deeply influenced by his attention to discourse and the body. Some, such as Ann Stoler, launched critiques of his stunning oversight of the colonial imprint on the history of sexuality (Stoler, 1995).<sup>16</sup> Others articulated his insights with those of earlier feminists. Notable among them is Judith Butler, whose *Gender Trouble* (1990) brings into critical conversation Monique Wittig's materialist critique of heterosexuality and notion of the lesbian as 'not woman' with Foucault's concept of the discursively constructed subject to advance a performative theory of gender and sexual identity. Butler's 1994 interview with Gayle Rubin teases out Rubin's engagement with Foucault as well as with Marxism and underscores these two formidable feminist theorists' ties to materialist analysis. *Female Sexualization: A Collective Work of Memory* (1989), by Frigga Haug et al., appropriates some of Foucault's insights for a more overtly socialist feminist approach to sexuality. Written by a socialist feminist collective based in Hamburg and West Berlin, the book makes a case for 'memory work' as a critical practice that entails writing narratives about becoming a feminine sexualized subject and reading them with and against a group's theoretical reflections.

The emergence of cultural studies as a broad-ranging field of inquiry in the 1980s was inspired by materialist efforts to address working-class and everyday cultural formations, and it eventually included innovative feminist research on popular culture as a key

component of young women's sexual desires and identifications. Much of this work teased out tensions between the oppressive impact of consumer culture and the incitements to sexual agency that pop culture offered women and girls. Janice Radway's research on women readers, *Reading the Romance* (1984), discloses romance reading as an escape from the dissatisfactions of women's everyday sexual relationships. Angela McRobbie, who was affiliated for several years in the 1980s with the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, did path-breaking research on working-class English adolescent girl culture which was later collected in her *Feminism and Youth Culture* (1991). McRobbie continues to analyze new configurations of femininity in popular cultural forms and to tease out the possibilities for women's sexual agency they offer. In the last decades of the twentieth century feminists increasingly paid attention to the double-edged limits and possibilities that capital's commodification of bodies and consciousness poses for women. Susan Willis's *A Primer for Daily Life* (1991) extends the theory of the commodity to an analysis of consumer culture's impact on children's desires and negotiation of gender differences, and she also looks to the utopian openings that nonetheless persist in childhood ritual and play. The US philosopher Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* (1993) is another example of materialist feminist work on the body that flourished in the 1990s. Bordo assesses the contemporary obsession with the sexualized body as evident in cosmetic surgery, dieting and physical fitness training and situates this cultural phenomenon in the changing relations of gender and labor for men and women.

During the 1990s historical work in sexuality studies, some of it feminist and loosely influenced by post-Marxist and Foucauldian historicism, was also analyzing the inflection of sexuality by nation-state regimes and drawing attention to sexual and racial formations outside the over-developed world and across several zones of empire as they shaped

state policy and the tourist industry (McClintock, 1995; Alexander, 1997). During these years feminist research on sexuality also drew attention to the interface of sexuality and labor in the circuits of global mobility. Notable examples include the special section of *Social Text* (McClintock, 1993) edited by Anne McClintock on the sex trade; Lillian Robinson and Ryan Bishop's analysis of sexual cultures and the Thai economic miracle (1998); and Kamala Kempadoo's research on Caribbean tourism and the sex trade (Kempadoo, 1999). With the demise of the Soviet Union socialist feminists were coming to terms with the paradoxical impact of socialism on women's culture, labor and sexuality in their everyday lives (Haug 1991). Cynthia Enloe's 1993 investigation of 'postwar postpatriarchy' in Bosnia, El Salvador, Russia, Vietnam and other countries makes incisive connections between the politics of sexuality and militarism in the wake of the Cold War. Throughout these years the Mexican feminist theorist Marta Lamas, who founded and directed the journal *Debate feminista*, was also writing about the social production and commodification of women's sexualized bodies and developing projects devoted to women's reproductive health and the health needs of independent sex workers. By the late 1990s and into the first decades of the twenty-first century feminists were organizing and writing about the extreme sexual violence accompanying warfare and the ravages of neoliberal capitalism. One notable example is the work of journalists and researchers, many materialist feminists, working in collaboration with activists on both sides of the US–Mexican border, who have continued to address the murders of hundreds of women in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico (Fregoso and Bejarano, 2010; Ravelo and Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, 2006; Wright 2006).

One of the major effects of late twentieth-century theoretical attention to sexual discourse was the development of feminist critiques of heterosexuality. Although the institution of heterosexuality featured in the

work of lesbian feminists twenty years earlier, by the 1990s it had a distinctly post-structuralist twist, meaning that the focus had shifted to the instability of heterosexuality as an effect of language, representations and practices. Judith Butler's argument for gender and sexual identity as performative practices became a defining paradigm for many feminist scholars. Postmodern thought shaped feminist attention to sexuality in cosmopolitan centers across the west. The Chilean feminist theorist Nelly Richard's work in the 1980s and 1990s, translated into English in the volume *Masculine/Feminine* (2004), also engages post-structuralism and materialism to investigate the intersection of gender and sexual identity. She explores the figure of the transvestite, whose representation exploded during the Pinochet regime against the background of prostitution and poverty and Chilean gay culture that was disrupting the rigid structures of city life. A more explicitly materialist feminist critique of heterosexuality grounded in the Marxist and socialist feminism of the 1970s was put forward by British sociologists Stevi Jackson (1999) and Diane Richardson (1996).

## QUEER NEOLIBERAL NORMS

In the early 1990s the term 'queer' began to circulate in activist and social movement discourse, displacing 'gay pride' and 'gay liberation' with a more diffuse emblem of non-normative resistance. The insurgence of 'queer' was spurred in large part by the frustrations of organizing around HIV-AIDS, and it was groups such as ACT UP in the US and its offshoot Queer Nation that early on promoted 'queer' as the banner of a liberation politics that confronted the oppressive norms of race, gender and sexuality. 'Queer' had an uneasy and at times oblique relation to sexual liberation's more materialist analysis and activism, and some queer-identified groups had members with Marxist intellectual roots. For example, the organization OutRage!, formed in 1990 in the UK, drew on members

of the Marxist-leaning Gay Liberation Front to fight against police brutality and advocate for gay and lesbian civil rights. Manifestos and agit prop also at times merged queer and identity-based politics. For example, the manifesto of ACT-UP's offshoot Queer Nation targeted the violent effects of sexual norms and institutions while at the same time explicitly endorsing a sexual politics that aimed to 'make every space a Lesbian and Gay space' (Anon., 1990). 'Queer' quickly travelled across the circuits of knowledge production in the cosmopolitan centers of the global north and south and moved into academic writing as the sign of a critical confrontation with heterosexuality and a rescripting of identity and politics. Queer theorists employ many of the reading strategies of deconstruction as well as Foucauldian materialist analysis to critique the violent regimes of the normal that reproduce cultural distinctions – specifically, though not exclusively, the distinction between 'homo' and 'hetero'. The critical force of queer theory lies in its successful denaturalizing of these and other cultural forms. In disclosing the fluid and intersecting play of differences that undermines the stability of identities and norms, it draws upon Foucault's argument that sexuality is a historical and discursive effect in a diffuse field of power relations.

Undoubtedly queer theory generated new lines of inquiry in feminist and lesbian and gay studies, but, from its earliest formulations, its relation to feminism was vexed. Some materialist feminists found its neglect of capitalism problematic. Other feminists complained that queer approaches were displacing feminism's attention to gender and failed to address the persistence of patriarchal gender oppression. Counter charges claimed that sexuality requires an analytic distinct from feminist preoccupations with gender.

Like the uneven emergence of sexuality as a topic of concern for feminists, intellectual and political claims in the name of 'queer' were conditioned by historical developments. Queer theory was born during a

new stage of capitalism that has come to be called 'neoliberalism,' and it is to some degree its byproduct. At the same time that 'queer' was redefining sexual politics in the streets and the study of sexuality in the university, neoliberal policies were loosening state regulation of capital accumulation and privatizing industries, social welfare and an affective life of respectable consumer citizenship. The once-fixed boundaries policing normative sexuality according to a hetero-homosexual distinction were also relaxing as gay chic was being absorbed into cosmopolitan culture and opening lucrative markets. The result was the incorporation of homosexuals into a widening class divide and the creation of a limited version of equality for a narrow and domesticated gay sector. Although the neoliberal cultural imaginary came to include respectable queer subjects and gay families, and big business found new queer markets, norms regulated by sexual abjection continued to supplement capital accumulation.

In its early years, queer critique that addressed these contradictions was almost non-existent. By the mid to late 1990s, however, as the impact of neoliberal capitalism intensified, analyzes began to appear that recast the insights of queer theory into a historically based materialist analysis that addressed capitalism's expanding commodity culture (Hennessy, 2000; Gluckman and Reed, 1997; Morton, 1996). Some of that work built upon critiques of 'heteronormativity' that began to circulate when Lisa Duggan and Michael Warner first introduced that term in 1998. Chrys Ingraham's 1999 analysis of the wedding industry disclosed heterosexuality's institutional and ideological power, as does the anthology she later edited, *Thinking Straight* (2004). Several important studies in the next decade attended to the coalition of forces underlying the redistribution of wealth that neoliberal policies were accomplishing and their impact on sexual, racial and gendered subjects. Lisa Duggan's *Twilight of Equality* (2004) is a notable example. Another line of inquiry

combined feminist and queer theory with the post-Marxist materialism of Foucault and Deleuze to address the regulation of bodies and subjects in the wake of burgeoning nationalisms. Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), for instance, extends the critique of homonormative ideologies to 'homonationalisms' that shore up US imperial ambitions by distinguishing 'properly hetero and homo' citizens from perversely sexualized and racialized Arabs, Muslims and Sikhs.

Much of this new research in sexuality studies was pursuing critical avenues opened by decades of activism in the streets, and some important studies reflect on the implications of the institutional assimilation of queer and feminist social movements (Wiegman, 2012; R. Ferguson, 2012). The 2005 special issue of *Social Text*, which marked the fifteenth anniversary of queer theory, charts needed developments in a materialist queer theory. Among those they name are the militarization of state violence and the escalation of the US empire; the clash of religious fundamentalisms; the erosion of civil rights; the pathologizing of immigrant communities; shifting forms of migration; and the return to domesticity as a prophylactic against economic redistribution and cultural dissent (Eng et al., 2005). This list could also serve as a map for new directions in materialist feminist theoretical work on sexuality, with the addition of concerns that are likely to continue impacting women and LGBT populations, such as reproductive and sexual health, human trafficking, sex tourism, sexual violence and the role of sexuality in collective efforts to build alternative ways of life.

The most notable examples of twenty-first century materialist work in queer studies affirm a debt to feminist theory and social movement and insist that no politics will get us very far without a critical purchase on the ways that gender and sexual formations feature in capitalism. They are joined by a growing number of feminist sexuality studies pursuing 'theoretically informed' research

rather than the more philosophical 'theory per se'. The former develops concepts through investigations of specific historical or social problems rather than putting forward more generalized theories. Much of this research does not actually advance a historical materialist or socialist feminist analysis or investigate sexuality's relation to labor, but it does enable a fuller understanding of the operation of sexual norms in nation-state institutions and imperial policies, and to some extent engages intellectuals from outside the global north. Among the few recent studies of sexuality that do situate their arguments quite firmly within historical materialist feminist theory is Kevin Floyd's *The Reification of Desire* (2009), which returns to Georg Lukács's concept of reification to locate the roots of queer politics in the emergence of twentieth-century consumer culture and sexualized masculine identities. *Hegemony and Heteronormativity*, edited by the Berlin-based scholars María do Mar Castro Varela, Nikita Dhawan and Antke Engel (2011), reclaims the early twentieth-century Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony to explain both the co-optation and subversive potential of 'queer' as a political stance.

## NEW DIRECTIONS

The historical urgencies of the present and foreseeable future call for analyses of sexuality that will delineate its ties to the contradictions and uneven developments of capitalism – the cultural values that legitimize greed and unmet need and the openings that nonetheless persist for erotic attachments that are integral to aspirations for an alternative way of life. Both young and established scholars in the new millennium are doing theoretically informed work on neoliberal capitalism's continuing expansion and the role of sexuality in organizing efforts against it, and some of the most valuable scholarship is elaborating an international and transnational materialist feminist analysis.

Noteworthy among studies of the impact of globalization in the afterlife of colonialism is work that addresses what it means to develop a critical perspective on the transnational circulation of queer identities in advertising, film, performance art, the internet or in the political discourses of human rights (Binnie, 2004; Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan, 2002). Some of the strongest recent work examines the sexual legacies of imperial culture in specific national contexts. The Canadian historian Joan Sangster has championed a more solidly marxist feminism that works with and against Foucauldian concepts to draw out the history of sexual regulation in Canada. Her *Regulating Girls and Women* (2001) investigates the process by which the law in Ontario, Canada constituted women and girls as sexualized subjects and took them into the courts through issues such as incest, sexual abuse, prostitution and delinquency. Some recent materialist work investigates sexuality as a feature of neocolonial legacies: for example, as a feature of the emotional labor of care work and the global sex industry; in the mapping of bodies and practices in the two-thirds world and its confrontation by indigenous cultures and colonial heritages; and in the sexual politics of transnational organizations such as the World Bank.<sup>17</sup> Another important line of investigation addresses sexuality as a feature of state policy and the policing of migration and diaspora, as, for example, in the disciplinary tactics of customs officials against lesbians and gay men or in the regulation of asylum and tourism (Cantú et al, 2009; Luibhèid and Cantú 2005; Luibhèid, 2008; Reddy, 2005). A recent new direction in sexuality studies addresses varied forms of affective and sexual affiliation among migrant workers from diverse regions of the world. Nyan Shah's (2012) research on the intimacies developed among South Asians, Afghanis and African Americans who came to the western regions of the United States and Canada and confronted the state's efforts to exert repressive pressure on non-whites is one example.

Scholarship on changing state and family formations within and across the global north and south also has drawn attention to sexuality as a feature of changing sexual practices in private and public spaces and institutions (R. Ferguson, 2012; González-López, 2005; Valentine, 2007). Much of this research continues to be informed by the influence of post-Marxist materialism. Lisa Rofel's *Desiring China* (2007) is one instance which draws upon Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari to address the constitution of desire in post-socialist China, where new forms of subjectivity, including gay identities, adhere to the practice of becoming transnational citizens.

Intellectuals working outside the United States and Europe are making notable contributions to materialist histories and analyzes of sexual cultures and identities, and future theoretical inquiry will no doubt build upon their contributions. Feminists are conducting historical and ethnographic research on sexuality in relation to modernity, media, non-capitalist economic projects and indigenous cultures in Nicaragua, Mexico, Iran and India (Howe, 2013; Stephen, 2002; Najmabadi, 2005; Kotiswaran 2012). The journal *positions* frequently publishes research on sexuality by emergent Marxist or materialist feminist scholars from Asia and the Asian diaspora. Their special issue, 'Beyond the Strai(gh)ts: Transnationalism and Queer Chinese Politics' (2010), edited by Petrus Liu and Lisa Rofel, focuses on a new generation of Chinese intellectuals who have turned to queer sexuality as a discourse through which to analyze a more complex and transnationalized world after the demise of class struggle and national liberation as politically effective metanarratives. Stevi Jackson, Liu Jieyu and Woo Juhyun's collection, *East Asian Sexualities*, contributes to these debates with studies from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea and Japan. As Petrus Liu contends, many Asian scholars are producing theories of sexuality that are incompatible with Foucault and that

suggest that future work in sexuality studies will need to address the assumption of Chinese – as well as other Asian and African – exceptionalisms (Liu, 2007). The question ‘Do non-western cultures have histories of sexuality that cannot be described by western categories?’ remains a provocative one for materialist theories to answer without forfeiting attention to sexuality as a major vector in global capitalism’s impact on national economies, cultures and organized resistance.

How sexuality features in the creation of alternative worlds is a topic broached by some of the most important new directions in materialist, feminist and queer studies, and it draws upon utopian aspirations that have been a recurring feature of the radical activism of Gay Liberation, queer politics and Marxist thought. Some of this work explicitly makes a case for reclaiming a queer utopian horizon (Muñoz, 2009), while other investigations probe the affective affiliations that can generate new possibilities of life even in the context of extraordinary neglect and surveillance (Povinelli, 2011). Researchers in and on the global south, many from materialist and socialist feminist standpoints, are raising new theoretical questions about sexuality and sexual identity as features of social movements that are confronting neoliberal transnational policies and bio-politics: as features of the landless workers’ movement, the food sovereignty movement and the Occupy and indignad@s movements (A. Ferguson, 2012). Research on HIV-AIDS-related activism and on labor and community organizing is also probing the erotic dynamics of social movements and suggesting that materialist theories of affect are useful for assessing the role of sexuality and sexual identity in organizing efforts around basic needs and sustainable futures (Gould, 2009; Hennessy, 2013).

My own most recent research has focused on what I call the ‘affect-culture’ of labor organizing by workers in the factories for assembly-for-export in northern Mexico. Over the past fourteen years, as I supported

Mexican workers’ campaigns for freedom of association, health and safety and clean air, land and water, I began to see sexuality and gender as strong attractors whose cultural meanings feature both in capital’s accumulation of surplus labor and in collective organizing for a better life. Workers’ testimonies affirm that the human capacity for affective attachment is essential to sustaining an organizing effort. While at times it may be articulated in conventional formulations of sexuality and gender, it also can spill into collective bonds that defy available cultural categories. In *Fires on the Border* (2013) I address the affectively laden ability to collaborate as a surplus that is never completely harvested by capital and that supports the common ground that organizing occupies. The affect-cultures of labor and community organizing in Mexico have a particular history, but the erotic identifications and attachments that have been integral to collective struggles for dignity and justice there also disclose features of sexuality and the erotic energies that supplement it that also pertain to organizing efforts elsewhere.

A reinvigorated materialist and feminist analysis of sexuality will continue to amplify our understanding of sexuality’s relation to the reproduction of social life, to the ways that bodies and well-being are impacted by political economy and culture and to the animation or erosion of collective social movement toward life-enhancing alternatives. Such a feminist analysis will not of itself mend the violence of capitalism that has so badly frayed the social fabric of communities around the globe, but without it feminist theory risks becoming irrelevant, unable to explain the conditions that shape the desires and needs that organize peoples’ lives. The rich archive of Marxist and socialist feminist analysis of sexuality’s material history is radical knowledge because it exposes the deeply rooted relation of sexual norms and practices to capital’s political economy and imperial ambitions. As such, it is an indispensable

resource as feminist theory continues to offer conceptual maps for the making of a better world.

## NOTES

- 1 The very term 'materialism' is a site of debate in feminist theory. Marxist feminism has the closest theoretical ties to the philosophy of historical materialism, even as it also expands this analysis of social relations to take into account the ways capitalism relies upon patriarchal and imperial domination. I use a lower case 'm' for 'marxist feminism' throughout the chapter to signify this critical engagement with Marxism. A key distinction of marxist feminism is the priority it gives to relations of labor necessary for survival, a process in which culture, including gender and sexuality, prominently features. Marxist feminists approach the oppression of women, sexual dissidents and people of color as integral to capitalism and pay special attention to the ways ideologies of race, gender and sex legitimize the devalued labor that feeds capital accumulation.

Socialist feminism is a term that gained traction in the 1970s, although since the nineteenth century women had been part of socialist movements and promoted women's issues as vital to them. By the mid-twentieth century socialist feminism began to bring together the insights of radical feminism's critique of patriarchy with Marxism's historical materialist class analysis. While socialist feminists call for the transformation of capitalism, they are reluctant to theorize gender and race as components of a single integrated capitalist system. Socialist feminists maintain that patriarchal sex-gender relations are semi-autonomous from capitalism, and they support the political importance of an autonomous feminist movement (Ferguson, 1989; 1991; Vogel, 1995: 40–46).

Materialist feminism is a term that also emerged in the mid to late twentieth century, coined by the French feminist Christine Delphy in 1975 (Delphy, 1980; Jackson, 1996). Materialist feminism initially signified a feminist intervention into Marxism that embraced its materialist premises but reoriented key concepts such as class and labor. By the end of the 1990s, however, materialist feminism's ties to historical materialism had considerably loosened to the point that a good deal of work that deployed this term had become post-Marxist, meaning that its analyzes tended to focus on culture, ideology or state formations and rejected the Marxist concept of capitalism as an integrated system or social totality in which culture is linked to relations of property and

labor. Indeed, some materialist feminist analysis does not address capitalism per se at all, devoting attention primarily to political or cultural practices formulated as discipline, governmentality or bio-politics. For critiques of this approach, see Conaghan, 2009; Giménez, 1997; Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997: 'Introduction'.

For Marxist and socialist feminists, class is the fundamental social relation through which capital is accumulated, and this accumulation depends upon cultural values that include sexuality. This understanding of class is quite different from the commonsense notion which marks distinctions in status among groups rather than a social relation between those who own and control capital and those who do not. While feminist materialist approaches have differing conceptions of class, each takes sexuality to be a historical discourse that draws upon gender and race in producing social subjects, embodied subjectivities and political standpoints.

- 2 For examples, see *The Modern Girl around the World* Research Group, 2008.
- 3 On Flynn, see her autobiography (Flynn, 1973); also Rowbotham, 1992: 151–62; and Tax, 2001. On Browne, see several of her pamphlets reprinted in Rowbotham, 1977 and her collaborative text on abortion (Browne et al., 1935).
- 4 Notable sex radicals of the late nineteenth century in the United States included Victoria Woodhull, Angela Heywood, Lois Waisbrooker, Lucinda Chandler, Ida Craddock, Lillie D. White, Dora Foster, Dr. Alice Stockham and Lillian Harman.
- 5 Other birth control champions included Kate O'Hare and Agnes Smedley (US), Marie Stopes (UK) and Katō Shidzue (Japan). Many other women who set up birth control clinics and saved women's lives around the world remain hidden from history.
- 6 See the Canadian scholars Benston (1969), P. Morton (1971), and Seacombe (1974); also the Italian feminist Maria Dalla Costa and her collaborator, then US-based Selma James, who together with other feminists launched the wages for housework movement (1972).
- 7 For critiques of Rubin's essay from a Marxist feminist position, see Hartsock, 1985: 293–304; and Hennessy, 2000: 179–89.
- 8 See Rubin, 2012 for her reflections on the significance of these two essays.
- 9 See Hatem, 1987 for an assessment of Marxian approaches to women's sexuality in this period that consider patriarchal class formations in the Middle East.
- 10 The other three statements are from the Socialist Feminist Conference in Yellow Springs, OH; the Berkeley-Oakland Women's Union; and an analysis of Marxist-Feminist Groups 1–5.

- 11 See the response to Barrett and McIntosh by Bhavnani and Coulsen, 1986.
- 12 Among groups that set out to develop Marxist or socialist (though not feminist) analyzes of sexuality were the Los Angeles Research Group; the Lavender and Red Union (Los Angeles); Red Butterfly (New York); the Gay Left Collective (UK); and the Gay Socialist Action Project (New York City). See also Mieli on Italian Gay Liberation and the Gay Left in the UK.
- 13 Her lecture 'The Straight Mind', delivered to the Modern Language Association that year, was published two years later in *Questions Féministes*.
- 14 Jackson and Scott, 1986 include a section on these debates as well as a section on related debates regarding the commercialization of sex. See also Vance, 1984.
- 15 For notable examples see Chauncey, 1995; D'Emilio and Freedman, 1997; Lovell, 1987; Newton et al., 1983; Newton and Rosenfelt, 1986; Stansell, 1987; Walkowitz, 1982; 1992.
- 16 Critiques of Foucault's neglect of gender also can be found in Diamond and Quinby, 1988 and Hekman, 1996.
- 17 On global care and sex industries, see Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Hoang, 2010. On transnational sex practices, see Bedford, 2009; Garza Carvajal, 2003; Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, 2007; Green, 2001; Green and Babb, 2002; Liu, 2007; 2010.

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