

THE ECLIPSE OF MATERIALISM: MARXISM AND THE WRITING OF SOCIAL HISTORY IN THE 1980s

BRYAN D. PALMER

This is not a good time to be a historical materialist. It is not even a good time to be a **historian**.¹

Explaining this negative conjuncture and detailing its dimensions would be a large project involving a many-sided appreciation of current economic, political and intellectual trends. Each strand in this rope **strangling** the possibilities of historical materialism and its project of understanding and appreciating the past so as to be able to change the present and transform the future would require exploration and **critique**.² Here I will only allude to the extent to which one decisive and determining force in this conjuncture has been Stalinism's final instance. For surely no specific process has more single-handedly opened the floodgates of attack on Marxism and its analytic categories and political project than the collapse of the degenerate and deformed workers states in which **socialism/communism** had **supposedly** been constructed. This world historic event, in the making since the mid-1920s, but associated most strongly with ruptures such as 1956 and 1968, reached a new culmination in the 1980s. It necessarily conditioned much of the climate in which the scholarship of that decade matured.³

Academics and intellectuals are not ones to stay with a sinking ship for long, however sound its original structure and guiding principles may have been. Many historians who once considered themselves historical materialists have been distancing themselves from Marxism for a number of years. With the current crisis of Stalinism, this process has accelerated. What is peculiar about the late 1980s is the extent to which a backing away from historical materialism has, within the peculiarities of the **political** economy of the moment, coincided with declarative statements about the end of history itself.

At its most blatantly ideological, this trend is nicely and neatly articulated in the statements of the Right. Thus Francis Fukuyama proclaimed in the summer of 1989: 'What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution

and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final **form** of human **government**.⁴ Such complacent and self-congratulatory politics are to be expected from some quarters, which have been far from slow in consolidating whatever ideological gain can be quickly and cheaply amassed from Stalinism's sordid denouement.

More interesting is the seemingly **unrelated**, but definitely parallel, development in the intellectual arena, where for some time historical materialism and history itself have been interrogated and jettisoned by those championing the discursive, centreless nature of a pervasive power **which** is bounded not so much by class relations and struggles, or the structures of historically determined political economy, but by discourse, representation, and a social construction weighted heavily toward the ideological. This is, simply put, the poststructuralism premise, the **ideological/intellectual** freight accompanying the postmodernist 'condition'.

Sande Cohen introduces a recent dissection of historical narration with words that link Marxism and history in a chain that it is his purpose to break in its entirety: 'Historical thought is a manifestation of reactive **thinking-about**, which blocks the act of thinking-to. The "perplexity of History" (**Arendt's** term), a Liberal projection which also includes, unhappily, most of Western Marxism, arises, I argue, from the ill-conceived act of trying to make "history" relevant to critical thinking. What actually occurs by means of "historical thought" is the destruction of a fully semanticized **present**.⁵ Less abrasive, but fundamentally compatible, is the position of the preeminent **Derridean** feminist, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who, in alliance with Michael Ryan, has attempted to congeal **Marxism** and deconstruction. Spivak reduces 'the production of historical accounts' to 'the discursive narrativization of events.' 'Since the incursion of "theory" into the discipline of history, and the uncomfortable advent of Michel Foucault,' she declares in what is an amazingly reductionist and chronologically current collapse of theory into a singular body of thought, 'it is no longer too avant-garde to suspect or admit that "events" are never not discursively constituted and that the language of historiography is also **language**.'⁶ The Althusserian and neo-Althusserian idealism that Edward Thompson pilloried so mercilessly in the late 1970s precisely because, among other things, it declared the study of history 'not only scientifically but also politically valueless,' has returned in different dress.⁷

History – as lived and written – is indeed at a specific crossroads. But it is not the self-indulgent unintelligibility of a postmodernist late twentieth-century swirl of excess, waste, and disaccumulation depicted in some ostensibly theoretical texts. Nor is it at its own end, as proclaimed from the pulpits of the ideological Right. Rather, capitalism is impaled on its own contradictions, while Stalinism is coming unglued in its final failures to construct anything resembling socialism out of its bureaucratic mismanagement, suppression of workers democracy, and corruption and deformation of the planned

economy. The way out of this impasse is not, theoretically or practically, to buy into it and its logic of **disintegration**,⁸ as both the ideologues of the Right and many on the fashionable post-structuralist Left would advocate. Historical materialism and Marxist analysis remain interpretive tools that aid in providing explanations of why the world – capitalist and socialist – is unfolding, if not as it should, at least as it is. Whatever small part the writing of a social history erected on these conceptual foundations can play in resisting the pressures of the moment will happen only if **some** refusals and denials begin to be made. This essay attempts to explore how that might be done.

It commences with an irony, and one that reinforces an appreciation of the extent to which Stalinism's costs are being exacted in ways that are as complex as they are often unanticipated. For if some of historical materialism's finest recent texts grew directly out of overt repudiation of Stalinism, their engagement with this Stalinism may well have unintentionally opened cracks in doors that would widen to **explicit** assault on historical materialism in later years. What follows thus begins with the two-sidedness of the historical materialism of E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, arguably the **most** influential writers to register an impact on an entire generation of social historians. It then moves into a discussion of how social history is currently being written, with special reference to the repudiation of historical materialism via the appropriation of **critical/discourse** theory or post-structuralist thought. Finally, it suggests that much feminist writing, undoubtedly the single most influential – if highly differentiated – current within the contemporary writing of social history, feeds into this general context of post-structuralism to denigrate historical materialism and push history in specific and problematic directions.

A Paradoxical Legacy: Thompson, Williams, and the Break ~~From~~ Stalinism

Thompson's histories, which have spawned an industry of historiographic criticism in the 1980s, were forged in his break from **Stalinism**.⁹ **Theoretically**, his exit from the Communist Party of Great Britain was posed in terms of his political and conceptual reading of the deficiencies of the orthodox Marxist metaphor of a determining economic base and a derivative superstructural realm. 'In fact,' he concluded, 'no such basis and superstructure ever existed; it is a metaphor to help us to understand what does exist – men, who act, experience, think, and act again.' On the political plane, all of this took on even more sinister trappings: 'It turns out that it is a bad and dangerous model, since **Stalin** used it not as an image of men changing in society but as a mechanical model, operating semi-automatically and independently of conscious human agency.' In Thompson's view, it was necessary to relearn what **Marx** and **Engels** understood well, 'that man is human by virtue of his culture, the transmission of experience from

generation to generation; that his history is the record of his struggle truly to apprehend his own social existence,' a contest of liberation from 'false, partial, class consciousness,' thereby freeing humanity 'from victimhood to blind economic causation, and extending immeasurably the region of choice and conscious agency.'

Thompson worked this theoretical resistance to the metaphorical notion of a base and its reflective superstructures into writings of unrivalled historical richness, wrestling with determination in ways that could step outside of the rigidities of the **base/superstructure** metaphor. Yet none of this argument was ever meant to imply that critical processes of historical formation, such as class, exercised an independence of 'objective determinations' or could be 'defined simply as cultural formation.' The attempt to pigeon-hole Thompson's writings in some slot labelled '**culturalist**,' associated with Richard Johnson and others affiliated with the **Birmingham** Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was, as Thompson quite rightly insisted, an 'invention' constructed 'from some sloppy and impressionistic' understandings of historical texts and **contexts**.¹⁰

As Thompson's critical engagement with the inadequacies of the base-superstructure metaphor unfolded within histories and polemics, Raymond Williams was staking out different, but complementary, ground in his theoretical elaborations on 'cultural materialism.' Less prone to reject the language of orthodox Marxism, Williams nevertheless paralleled Thompson in his relentless pursuit of the limitations of orthodoxy and, in particular, in his insistence that the base be conceived in such a way as to allow entry to the materiality of areas presumably once relegated irrevocably to the superstructure. In describing his theoretical purpose, Williams stated:

I was trying to say something very much against the gain of two traditions, one which has totally spiritualized cultural production, the other which has relegated it to secondary status. My aim was to emphasize that cultural practices are forms of material production, and that until this is understood it is impossible to think about them in their real social relations - there can only ever be a second order of correlation. But, of course, it is true that there are forms of material production which always and everywhere precede all other forms. . . . The enormous theoretical shift introduced by classical Marxism - in saying these are the primary productive activities - was of the most fundamental importance."

This Thompson-Williams influence has informed so much positive and exciting work within social history and Marxist theory that it will seem ungenerous to suggest that it has also forced a certain price to be paid. But that is what I will maintain. For as much as was gained in the necessary confrontation with the mechanical consequences of an undialectical and rigidly structuralist implementation of the one-sided notion of base and superstructure, so too was something lost in the assimilation of agency and structure, culture and materiality. Through no fault of their own, for they had charted much-needed and creative advances in the development of historical materialism, the theoretical claims of Thompson and Williams

were all too easily incorporated into an emerging orthodoxy that closed its nostrils to the foul smell of economism without reflecting on the extent to which it was also, simultaneously, shutting its eyes to materialism and the process of historical determination. The cultural became the material; the ideological became *the* real. What Thompson and Williams argued with a strong sense of the need to grasp determination, what in Thompson was always subordinated to a tough-minded insistence on an exacting confrontation with the historical sources and what in Williams was always developed with a sense of theoretical complexity, others took up far more **indiscriminatingly**. In the case of Thompson the relatively understated role of the economic in his histories was always a product of his understanding of the collective project of a group of (overwhelmingly Marxist) historians, many of whom addressed the material transformation of British society and the transition from feudalism to **capitalism**.¹² The Thompson-Williams rethinking of base and superstructure thus unintentionally paved the way for the denigration of the material and the **reification** of the ideal. '**Culturalism**' arrived, not with Thompson and Williams, but through a process of appropriation that disfigured their actual projects, that listened to only part of their statement.

This trend highlights the need, not to return to an unthinking mechanical Marxism, but to address the two-sidedness of the Thompson and Williams project, to begin to reconsider the now somewhat neglected importance of determination. This relationship of being and consciousness was always central to the materialist texts of social history and cultural studies associated with the writings of these authors, but that dialogue between structure and agency has recently been silenced in a one-sided act of borrowing and suppression, in which the economically material realm's capacity to erect boundaries and set limits has receded from analytic view. Nowhere is this more apparent than within current trends in the writing of social history, most especially in terms of the now fashionable attraction to poststructuralism.

Social History in the 1980s: The Eclipse of Materialism

It is not possible to survey adequately the entire field of social history in an article such as this. But it is apparent that historical materialism, once embraced by many practising social historians who looked to a wide array of writing associated with the British Marxist **historians**,¹³ is no longer held to be of great importance in understanding the past.

William M. Reddy centres his recent discussion of money and liberty in modern Europe around the need to question the very concept of class, encasing his argument in rhetoric that exposes both an idealist understanding of what history entails and a willingness to employ a 'Thompsonian' misreading of Thompson's own arguments: 'A class in the making is not a class; a class that is fully made, in this world of becoming, this vale of tears that is history, is **dead**.' More blunt are the words of Michael **Kazin**. 'It is time for the US

left to shed a grand and fond illusion,' Kazin pronounces with confidence, adding that the working class in American history has 'seldom been more than a structural and rhetorical abstraction, employed primarily by socialist activists and intellectuals who hoped wage-earners would someday share their socialist analysis and vision of society.' Kazin 'reads' the political language of labour single-mindedly through the words of a handful of trade union leaders, **dismissing** in sweeping blows the history of the Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor, the Industrial Workers of the World, the Congress of Industrial Organization, and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers as one blurred failure that proves decisively the absence of class in American history. Within the labour movement, then, Kazin argues that it was understandable that 'an essentially home-grown political language developed,' taken up by discontented worker activists who thought of themselves more as virtuous representatives of the American "people" than as members of a class.' This is a perverse distortion of a century of unfolding class relations, resting on a methodological reductionism and simple-minded conflation of class experience and the rhetoric of a handful of trade union tops. But an old story has been given a new twist: out of the language of a classless people comes pluralistic **America**.¹⁵

Reddy and Kazin are new additions to the ongoing left populist parades marching not so much toward anything of political and intellectual worth as they are running scared from class. It has become something not to be associated with, not only on the Right, but also among many on the ostensible Left.¹⁶

The particular strain of retreat associated with the current dismissal of class first surfaced early in the decade, and was most dramatically discerned in the historical and political writings of Gareth Stedman Jones and in the essays of Michael Ignatieff. Both authors broke from class, as have Reddy and Kazin, in good measure on the basis of an elevation of language, which takes on a singular importance as a determining materiality.

For Stedman Jones, the discovery of language and recognition of its historical capacity to construct being was a decisive historiographic rupture that necessitated a rethinking of how historians operate and how they employ (heavily Thompsonian) terms such as experience, consciousness, and class:

What both 'experience' and '**consciousness**' conceal – at least as their usage has evolved among historians – is the problematic character of language itself. Both concepts imply that language is a simple medium through which 'experience' finds expression – a romantic conception of language in which what is at the beginning inner and particular struggles to outward expression and, having done so, finds itself recognized in the answering experience of others, and hence sees itself to be part of a shared experience. It is in some such way that 'experience' can be conceived cumulatively to result in class consciousness. What this approach cannot acknowledge is all the criticism which has been levelled at it since the broader significance of **Saussure's** work was understood – the materiality of language itself, the impossibility of simply referring it back to some primal anterior reality, 'social being', the impossibility of abstracting experience from the language which structures its articulation. In areas other than history, such criticisms are

by **now well known** and do not **need** elaboration. But historians – and social historians in particular – have either been unaware or, when aware, extremely resistant to the implications of this approach for their own practice, and this has been so most of all perhaps when it touches **such a central topic as class**.

Stedman Jones went on, from these conceptual beginnings, to rewrite the history of Chartism, to claim against the weight of past Marxist interpretation that the mobilizations of the 1830s and 1840s were not the product of class antagonisms and struggles but, rather, were constructed out of the cross-class language of eighteenth-century radicalism. The Chartists were 'made', not in the structured relations of exploitation and accumulation and their human hostilities, but within a linguistic paradigm governed by attachment to 'natural rights,' and the fears that such rights were being usurped by parasitism, fraud, and force. As the supposed site of both these 'rights' and their debasement, the state, and not the process of class formation and degradation, was thus 'the principal enemy upon whose actions radicals had always found that their credibility depended.' He also offered a congruent argument about the contemporary condition of the Labour Party, suggesting that its revival in post-Thatcherite Britain **could** only be sustained by junking its long-standing reliance on a 'homogeneous proletarian estate whose sectional political interest is encompassed by trade unions.' The answer to the Labour Party's woes and the reinterpretation of **Chartism** came together in an embrace of a particular **kind** of popular **frontism**, in which class was held to be of marginal importance in the building of mass movements of resistance or the reversal of the **skidding** fortunes of electoralist **socialism**.¹⁷

The critical response to this reassessment of **Chartism** has established beyond doubt two significant flaws. First, the conceptual foundations of the argument are flimsy at best, irresponsible at worst. Constructed out of cavalier assertions, Stedman Jones's attachment to the new-found analytic potential of language has been justly attacked. It appears as little more than a demonstration of the unsubstantiated enthusiasms of an advocate who has yet to master the intricacies of a theoretical system. Second, as a reconstruction of historical happenings, Stedman Jones's **Chartism** is **aridly** one-dimensional: its language is that of the published vocabulary of the movement's national leadership to the exclusion of many other class-accented discourses and symbolic statements.¹⁸

Yet it would be wrong to imply that Stedman Jones's piece has been unimportant. Many are the footnotes of nodding approval. Within writing on the American **working** class, for instance, most social historians who champion uncritically the positive contribution of a language of labour republicanism almost universally find themselves in agreement with Stedman Jones and in opposition to an interpretive stress on class consciousness. Thus Leon Fink, the most authoritative voice endorsing the labour republicanism of the Knights of Labor and the Great Upheaval of the 1880s, quotes favourably Robert Gray's rejection of 'the straw person model of a class

conscious and revolutionary **working** class, equipped with a rigorous class ideology and theoretical understanding of the capitalist economy.' Gray's argument that such cases are rare echoes views put forward by the late Herbert G. **Gutman** and his collaborator Ira Berlin. Similarly, Sean Wilentz, who champions the labour republicanism of the **1830s**, rails against the attempt to measure American workers against some essentialist notion of class consciousness by which they will supposedly be found wanting and 'exceptional'. The consequence is that discussion of class consciousness is either exorcised or diluted to the point that any and all opposition by workers constitutes its realization. Yet curiously enough, Gray's original opposition to an essentialized class consciousness was posed against the very same Stedman Jones to whom social historians of American labour such as Fink and Wilentz acknowledge a debt. What is involved in this contradictory **confusion**?¹⁹

On one level, it is a function of the internal inconsistencies of '**Rethinking Chartism**,' which is pulled in one direction by Stedman Jones's recent attraction to popular frontist cross-class alliances, most evident in his essay, 'Why is the Labour Party in a Mess?', a trajectory preceeded by many others: **Gorz's** 'farewell to the working class'; Laclau's and **Mouffe's** rejection of proletarian politics in favour of a 'socialism' paced by popular social movements; Gavin Kitching's notion of socialist transformation as the outcome of capitalist prosperity and the 'intellectual sophistication' of mental **workers**.²⁰ The Stedman Jones of this fast 1980s track is a reconstructed, 'true' socialist, disillusioned with class and its long-standing political failures at home and abroad, willing to rest his argument on the determinations of discourse and to interpret historical experience on the ground of reified language. But there lies between the lines of 'Rethinking Chartism,' not unlike a **Derridean** 'trace', the high structuralism of the Stedman Jones of the 1960s and 1970s. And this pulls the rereading of **Chartism** in another direction. That Stedman Jones knew the poverty of empiricism and how to measure class consciousness with the refined idealism of an Althusserian **gaze block**.²¹ Critics of Stedman Jones are quite right to see an idealized understanding of class and class consciousness at work in his 'Rethinking Chartism,' an essay that undoubtedly rests on an assumption about a model of mature class **consciousness** against which **Chartism** is found wanting. But oddly enough such critics sidestep the questions that should then follow: why does Stedman Jones so resolutely avoid evidence of transitional consciousness? why does he pay so little attention to the bedrock of class consciousness, the level of development of production itself? and why, finally, does he conclude his reinterpretation with an attempt actually to deny any place to class consciousness's role in the rise and fall of Chartism?

The answer lies in the changed politics of Stedman Jones and in the unwillingness of critics drawn intuitively to this politics to question too deeply a problem that would demand that they themselves address the relationship of class, class consciousness, and the project of social transformation. In

short, the answer lies within the realm of historical materialism. Stedman Jones has moved on its margins, drawing away from an earlier Marxist scholasticism fixated on an idealized class consciousness toward a reformist popular **frontism** in which class consciousness is immaterial. If Stedman Jones fails to shake off entirely his intellectual past, he nevertheless ends up sufficiently unambiguous in his espousal of a politics of broad classless opposition to the state – which is what Chartism's success was about, he argues, and what the Labour Party needs to cultivate now – that he finds support in many quarters which share this ultimate politics. Politics, then, makes particular bedfellows: it matters not that those social historians who find the very term 'class consciousness' unnecessary, if not offensive, end up snuggling up to an argument about **Chartism** that places it, in an idealized way, at the centre of an analytic revision. What is lost in this bedding down of disparate conceptual trends is any attachment to an orthodox Marxist appreciation of attention to some elementary categories of historical materialism: class, consciousness, struggle.

The point is not that these categories, as categories, must be preserved on faith, but rather, that they provide just the **kind** of explanatory power needed to understand the complexities of mass **working-class** mobilizations such as the **Chartism** of the 1830s and 1840s or the North American Great Upheaval of the 1880s. These were class movements; they were most emphatically about class struggle; and their rise and their fall can be interpreted only by attention to conjunctures of economic structure and class activism.' Their **discourses** were not uniformly cut from the same cloth (either in **comparison** with one another, or internally), however, and although they were undoubtedly languages of class and struggle, they were not always – understandably so – unadulterated voices of class consciousness. Stedman Jones makes too much of this, the American social historians who uncritically embrace labour republicanism too little. Against this reading of the past, so obviously structured out of the political retreat from class evident in 1980s intellectual life, there remains no better antidote than adherence to the tenets of historical materialism, where class, consciousness and struggle remain vital points of **entry**.²³

Michael Ignatieff also gravitated to language, but he had less distance to travel in his opposition to Marxism. Ignatieff revealed how attraction to language could strike a concrete blow against class struggle and ingratiate its advocates with the structures of 'progressive' authority. In the words of Ellen Wood, Ignatieff became 'the darling of the British literary press, their favourite repentant socialist.' His 'Strangers and Comrades' proved a timely, refined, caring blow against class and its politics:

There are those on the **Left** who maintain that the **miners' strike** is a vindication of class-based politics after decades in which the agenda of the **Left** was defined by **cross-class campaigns** like feminism and CND. Yet the strike demonstrates the reverse: a labour movement which is incapable of presenting a class claim as a national claim, which can only pose its demands

in the language of total victory, which takes on the State and ends up on the **wrong** side of the law, cannot hope to **conserve** its support and legitimacy among the working class public. The miners' strike is not the vindication of class politics but its death throes. . . . The trouble with Arthur **Scargill's** politics is not that it doesn't have justice on its side, but that it utterly lacks a conception of how competing classes, regions, races, and religions can be **reconciled** with each other in a national community.

'What the **Left** needs,' concluded Ignatieff, 'is a language of national unity expressed as commitment to fellowship among strangers. We need a language of trust built upon a practice of social **comradeship**.'²⁵

A year later, the logic of Ignatieff's linguistic turn had led **him** so far from class that his Needs of Strangers did not need to touch on issues like the miners' strike. Instead, in the manner of the 'true' socialists of the **1840s**, it agonized over the conceptualization of liberty, finding a predictable resolution of the dilemmas of the modern market world in words:

We need words to keep us human. Being human is an accomplishment like playing an instrument. It takes practice. . . . Our needs are made of words: they **come** to us in speech, and can die for lack of expression. Without a public language to help us find our own words, our needs will dry up in silence. It is words only, the **common** meanings they bear, which give me the right to speak in the name of the strangers at my door. Without a language adequate to this moment we **risk** losing ourselves in resignation towards the portion of life which has been allotted to **us**.²⁶

As **Marx** and **Engels** concluded in their attack on the German 'true socialism' of the **1840s**: 'After these samples of. . . Holy Scripture one cannot wonder at the applause it has met with among certain drowsy and easy-going **readers**.'²⁷

Ignatieff was never much of a historical materialist, but he was, at one time, something of a historian. He began his journey toward this scriptural end with a Foucauldian history of the **prison**.²⁸ As such, he provides a tentative link and implicit connection to the poststructuralism of French thought. More than any other body of theory, poststructuralism has influenced the writing of social history in the 1980s. In its emphasis on the discursiveness of power it has challenged historical materialism directly. Much of the Anglo-American writing alluded to above draws on the implosion of theory associated with poststructuralism. Nowhere is the impact of this poststructuralist thought more pronounced, however, than in writing on the French Revolution, once associated strongly with the materialist conception of history. In the late 1980s that materialism has been eclipsed.

The French Revolution stands as one of the most significant events of modern times. Like other revolutions, it was, in **Marx's** conception of history, 'a driving force.' One would expect debate and disagreement about this revolution, but the surprising intellectual reality is that interpretive hegemony has historically consolidated quickly, vanquishing analytic opponents with sharp, decisive polemical strokes that, like the guillotine, hold forth little possibility of reconsiderations and reassessments. Like the Revolution itself, these consolidating orthodoxies have passed through phases. What concerns us here is the movement from Jacobinism to Thermidorian Reaction.

From World War **II** to the **mid-1960s**, a period of important developments in which professional historians adopted new methods and took on a new stature, there could be no question of the dominance of what many have called a Marxist, and others more precisely, a Jacobin, conception of the French **Revolution**.²⁹ The broad, bold lines of interpretive direction had been drawn by Marx and **Engels** in the **1840s**, **although by** no means in ways that were devoid of contradiction and ambiguity:

The revolutions of 1648 and 1789 were not English and French revolutions, they were revolutions of a European type. They did not represent the victory of a particular class of society over the old political order, they proclaimed the political order of the new European society. The bourgeoisie was victorious in these revolutions, but the victory of the bourgeoisie was at that time the victory of a new social order, the victory of bourgeois ownership over feudal ownership, of nationality over provincialism, of competition over the guild, of the division of land over primogeniture, of the rule of the landowner over the domination of the owner of the land, of enlightenment over superstition, of the family over the family name, of industry over heroic idleness, of bourgeois law over medieval privileges. * *

This interpretive skeleton was fleshed out by Georges Lefebvre and, later, by **Albert Soboul**, two modern historians who did more than any others to establish the orthodoxy of the leftist analysis of the Revolution. That orthodoxy insisted on the bourgeois nature of the Revolution and, especially with Soboul, laid stress upon the importance of class struggle in the making of 1789 and its aftermath, positing a confrontation in which the bourgeoisie, drawing on the popular classes of town and country, ousted the aristocracy.³¹

Alfred **Cobban** crystallized the early discontent with the **Lefebvre-Soboul** interpretation in a series of writings. This highly sceptical new revisionism argued that feudalism had ceased to be an operative social formation long before the outbreaks of 1789, that the term bourgeoisie was meaningless, and that the Revolution was an upheaval culminating in continuity rather than a class rupture with the past. **Cobban** has been followed by many others. According to the new orthodoxy, since there was no revolutionary bourgeoisie, the Marxist histories of Lefebvre and **Soboul** are fatally flawed. This revisionism has carried the day and among historians of the French Revolution the old left-leaning historiography is regarded as rather old hat, another casualty of the demise of historical materialism in the **1980s**.³²

Against this idealized caricature of a revolutionary bourgeoisie judged not to have existed, Marxist theory and history has long grappled with the class paradoxes of revolutionary transformation. As his preface to *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* made clear, Marx drew no necessary relationship between structural class position and consciousness of that position, which was always a far more confused and ambivalent process than the objective conditions of production. In the concrete case of the French Revolution, Marx recognized that much of the riddle of the class contradictions of transformation lay in Jacobinism, its language and its attempt to revolutionize society politically rather than socially and economically.³³

Trotsky would later embrace a similar position, but the historiography of the Revolution, especially after Soboul began to make an impact, treated **Jacobinism** much more heroically, drawing on **Lenin's** sympathetic reading of the Jacobins and, perhaps, Gramsci's comparable comments in his *Prison Notebooks*. An analytic difference does exist, with Marx-Trotsky suspicious of the socioeconomic presence or 'reality' of Jacobin class 'interests,' and **Lenin, Gramsci,** and Soboul more likely to accept class force as a historical agent. But on the fundamental political level, this divergence recedes. Since proletarian revolution was not on the agenda in the **1790s, Jacobinism** represented, in Trotsky's words, 'the maximum radicalism which could be produced by bourgeois society.' It is therefore not surprising that subsequent Marxists have leaned sympathetically toward the likes of Robespierre and St Just. Marx himself saw these Jacobins as tragic victims of confusions and abstractions overdetermined by the material limitations of their **times**.³⁴

The revisionist assault on the Jacobin interpretation of the French Revolution seldom pauses to consider such matters. It knows class interest expresses itself unambiguously; it knows, consequently, that the failure of class interest to proclaim itself articulately and to personalize its presence in identifiable, countable **human** beings proves that class interest does not really exist. **Marx's** basic insight that the French Revolution 'did not represent the victory of a particular class. . . [but] proclaimed the political order of the new European society,' is thus beyond its conceptual grasp. Inasmuch as Soboul and others often seemed to telescope analysis of the Revolution into the confines of class struggle, gesturing all too weakly to the limitations of the structural features of productive life, they bear some responsibility for the new revisionism's **discontents**.³⁵ But the tendency to divorce the Revolution from material forces, including class alignments, is a retrogressive step. Fuelled by the fetishization of quantitative methodology and the rampant anti-Marxism of social science history in the 1970s and **1980s,** this analytic action looks persistently to the personnel of the Revolution, but not its political outcomes. Indeed, it takes a principled stand against the very consideration of origins and outcomes, unconsciously pulling a leaf from the pages of hedonistic critical **theory**.³⁶ A faction of the new revisionist camp has not surprisingly followed the drift of the 1980s, opting for a privileging of discourse, seeing the Revolution itself as a language or text in which imagery, rhetoric, and poetics abound, but where classes, material processes of accumulation and struggle, and the consciousness that develops around them are surprisingly silent.

The imprint of the anti-Marxism of this trend is captured nicely in **François Furet's** *Interpreting the French Revolution*. Composed of three essays addressing approaches to the history of the Revolution and an opening rambling, declarative statement, entitled, appropriately and defiantly, 'The French Revolution is Over,' the book is a manifesto for those dissatisfied with the Jacobin interpretation of 1789. Two of the four essays are of particular concern here, Furet's assault on Soboul and other Marxists,

originally published in *Annales* as 'The Revolutionary Catechism,' and his introductory **musings**. The first establishes the anti-Marxism of the Furet wing of the new revisionism, the latter its formal adherence to discourse.

Furet's 'Revolutionary Catechism' is a remarkably splenetic piece of scholarship. Commencing as a diatribe against a text written in opposition to Furet and Richet's popularly-aimed history of the Revolution, it quickly proceeds to argue that three pernicious influences haunt the Marxist-dominated historiography of 1789: the positing of a **kinship** between the French and Russian Revolutions, in which the former serves as mother to the latter; the substitution of a linear, simplistic Marxism for the more subtle, contradictory positions of Marx and **Engels** on the historical making of the French Revolution; and the consequent entrenchment of a 'neo-Jacobinist', 'Leninist-populist **vulgate**' as the sectarian motivation of a 'conservative spirit of a historiography that substitutes value judgements for concepts, final ends for causality, argument from authorities for open discussion' and, in the process, ensures a ritualistic denunciation of all other interpretation as counter-revolutionary and antinational. Furet is especially damning of a Marxist historiography – attributable to Soboul – that takes 'its bearings **from** the prevailing ideological consciousness of the period it sets out to **explain**.'³⁷

Impassioned references to the Gulag and persistent Soviet bashing indicate how much this essay is **skidding** out of control. What is interesting is Furet's inability to pause and consider the unusual critical inversion he finds himself within, and its own contradictory pulse. On the one hand, he chastizes Soboul for writing history that conveys a sense of the past as it was actually lived. 'From Soboul's language and ideas,' complains Furet, 'the reader almost feels as if he were participating in the meeting held on the famous night of 4 August 1789.' What Furet fails to appreciate is the extent to which Marxist historians are admonished to create just this kind of history, attentive to the past as it was experienced. Marxist historians are uniformly and roundly taken to task for imposing their false and unfittable conceptual agendas on a past that resists stubbornly such so-called 'presentist' ideological premises. If this charge of reproducing the past on its own terms is not sufficient, Furet then reaches into a more familiar anti-Marxist bag of charges to call Soboul to order for his theoretical reliance on the metaphysical categories of class analysis. That this dual charge of reproducing the past as it was lived and of imposing on it a theoretical construction of class that floats above the actualities of the Revolution contains a contradiction does not seem to bother Furet, who seems intent on forcing Soboul into whatever polemical corners best suit the dismissals of the moment. His reduction of Soboul's depiction of the contradictory composition, consciousness, and historic role of the sans-culottes to a mechanical cul-de-sac of simplistic class conflict flies directly in the face of what Soboul actually wrote about the struggles of the 1790s.³⁸

Against this caricature of **Soboul**, Furet posits the **determinations** of discourse. Oppression and discontent played little role in the unfolding events of **1789–1794**. Rather, it was language that paced all, leading the people where structures of power and authority **could** not. Indeed, power for Furet 'had no objective existence at the social level, it was but a *mental representation of the social sphere* that permeated and dominated the field of politics.' After decades of scholarship on the French Revolution in which one of the major events in the history of the modern world has been routinely scrutinized in ways at least somewhat congruent with the premises of historical materialism, the **1980s** culminates in historical writing lost in a swirl of circular idealism:

The 'people' were defined by their aspirations, and as an indistinct aggregate of individual 'right' wills. By that expedient, which precluded representation, the revolutionary consciousness was able to **reconstruct** an imaginary social cohesion in the name and on the basis of individual wills. . . . The idea of plot was cut from the same cloth as revolutionary consciousness because it was an essential aspect of the basic nature of that consciousness: an imaginary discourse on power. That discourse came into being, as we have seen, when the field of power, having become vacant, was taken over by the ideology of pure democracy, that is, by the idea that the people are power, or that power is the people.³⁹

Lest it be **misunderstood** that Furet's interpretive resurrection of idealism is a peculiarly idiosyncratic text, another recent, and highly acclaimed study, can be drawn upon to suggest the nature of the current trend within study of the French Revolution. Lynn Hunt's *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* is less irritatingly opaque than Furet's collection of essays; neither is it as overtly polemical. Produced within an American idiom, it is not so concerned to distance itself from Marxism, a consequence, no doubt, of historical materialism's weaker presence in the United States. It is more explicit, however, in its debt to post-structuralism. For all of its straightforwardness and its immersion in archival sources, which mark it out from the grand posturing of Furet's *Interpreting the French Revolution*, it bears the same stamps of anti-Marxism and the reification of language.

Like Furet, Hunt privileges the political, especially its symbolic and linguistic components, which she sees as far more than a mere expression of 'underlying' economic and social interests. 'Revolutionary political culture,' she insists, 'cannot be deduced from social structures, social conflicts, or the social identity of revolutionaries.' Political culture in the revolution was made up of 'symbolic practices, such as language, imagery, and gestures.' Echoing Furet, whom she quotes as establishing that speech substituted itself for power during the Revolution, and that 'the semiotic circuit [was] the absolute master of politics,' Hunt is adamant that language was itself an expression of power, shaping perceptions of interests and reconstituting the social and political world. She proposes to treat this 'foremost instrument' of the Revolution 'as a text in the manner of literary criticism.' This method allows her to avoid any interpretive slide into the abyss of 'class' politics: as a literary theorist she knows that authorial intention is always uncertain, as was that of the

revolutionary text, and she grasps that 'the French rhetoric of revolution had to provide its own hermeneutics.'

This results, as in Furet, in a conceptualization of the Revolution that rather wilfully ignores socioeconomic divisions and that reconstitutes the process of revolution through adherence to linguistic metaphors of the revolutionaries themselves. To explain the **abrupt** shifts in the Revolution, Hunt turns to Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, arguing that the course of the Revolution can be explained by 'the transformation of narrative structures that informed revolutionary rhetoric.' The 'generic plot' of revolution moved from comedy to romance, and in the process the conflictual but reconcilable characters are reconstructed in a set of mythical oppositions, with larger-than-life heroes pitted against cowardly villains. Hence the rise of the Radicals in 1792. Tragedy was around the corner, however, speaking its most dramatic lines in the person of Robespierre, and propelled forward by the revolutionary obsession with the conspiratorial plot. Capital, labour, exploitation, class struggle and accumulation were not the orchestrating principles here, but given the discourse of hostility to the aristocracy, Hunt suggests that this may have been a 'language of class struggle without class.' If you like your revolution neat, this is a drink for you.

Hunt then moves into a fascinating discussion of political symbolism and ritualism during the Revolution. She extends our knowledge of the importance of this realm but oversteps interpretive acceptability with the blunt extremism of her denial of the structural and material substance of power, which is never interrogated, and the force of political ideas and strata, which are dwarfed by the larger-than-life universe of determining images and representations. The result is a book in which the politics of revolution tend to be divorced from ideas, and revolutionaries galvanized solely by the cockade and the symbol. So, too, is politics considered outside of any material referents, such as work, wages, or social mobility.

Oddly enough, Hunt does acknowledge that the revolutionary political class that operated within the symbolic formation of revolutionary rhetoric and image was indeed 'bourgeois.' But so hegemonic is the new revisionism and its hostility to any notion of 'bourgeois' revolution that Hunt backtracks, arguing that the term bourgeois is too general to discriminate between revolutionary militants and their moderate opponents. It is as if any sense of class fractions within a moment of revolutionary turmoil must be exorcised if class is to have any meaning.

In the end, Hunt demonstrates the presence of class in the revolution but retreats to the higher ground of language, the argument wrapped in circularity: 'the left won elections where the Jacobins of the towns and villages were able to develop relationships and organizations favorable to the defence of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and the right won elections where royalists **and/or** partisans of a republic of order were able to galvanize their clients into movements against the innovating Republic.' Convinced that any search for

structural origins or outcomes is suspect, Hunt **reifies** political representation, treating the principles and personnel of revolution as abstracted, unmediated essences anchored only in their own cultural moment and imagination. The linguistic turn proves a dead **end**.⁴⁰

What has been killed along the way is any appreciation of the complex interaction of economic structure and historical agency, of imposed necessity and cultivated desire. In the case of the French Revolution what has been lost is an appreciation of **politics** as the outcome of such conjunctures and dialogues, just as much recent writing on the history of workers submerges class, class consciousness, and class struggle in the determinations of discourse. Ultimately this analytic trend, congruent with – if not bred of – cavalier or conscious identification with the tenets of poststructuralist thought, has gone a considerable distance toward eclipsing historical materialism as a presence within the writing of social history.

Feminism(s) and the Eclipse of Materialism

What a difference a decade makes. There can be no mistaking that an admittedly highly differentiated feminism is now a presence of considerable importance within intellectual life in general and academic circles in particular. If the shifting natures of various feminisms are extremely difficult to chart with precision, it is nevertheless apparent that over the course of the 1980s a striking generalized trend has occurred. The extent to which feminism, broadly defined, has established itself and its concerns and vocabularies is perhaps not unrelated to the virtual collapse of the attempt to connect Marxism and feminism and the emergence of a community of feminists increasingly antagonistic to, and flippantly dismissive of, Marxist scholarship and politics. If there remain some few feminists who insist that analysis of the experience of gender be related to **other** experiences of oppression (race/ethnicity/region), however gingerly, or suggest that class, as the site of exploitation, mediates gender and its commonalities in ways that produce divergent histories, they grew less in numbers by the year, their voices more subdued, if not drowned out in the **clamour** of hostile accusation questioning their commitment to feminism. This development has had a profound impact within the writing of social history and it has extended and deepened the attack on historical materialism. It is also not unrelated to the reception of post-structuralism within an admittedly variegated set of feminisms.

Nothing is more instructive in this regard than a comparison of the original 1980 publication of Michèle Barrett's ***Women's Oppression Today*** and the new introduction to the 1988 edition. **Barrett** proves something of a barometer of changes in feminism over the course of this decade, being so astute as actually to change the subtitle of her volume so as to line herself up with the mainstream of feminist thought. What she once authored under the banner 'Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis,' she now chooses to promote as a text in 'The **Marxist/Feminist** Encounter.'

Barrett begins and closes her new introduction with gestures towards poststructuralism, commencing with praise for **Spivak** and others and ending with a startling conception of how much the world has supposedly changed in less than a decade:

Here lies, perhaps, the **greatest** challenge to the assumptions within which *Women's Oppression Today* was written: the discourse of post-modernism is premised on an explicit and argued denial of the **kind** of grand political projects that both 'socialism' and 'feminism' by definition are. But post-modernism is not something that you can be for or against: the reiteration of old **knowledges** will not make it vanish. For it is a cultural climate as well as an intellectual position, a political reality as well as an academic fashion. The arguments of post-modernism already represent, I think, a key position around which feminist theoretical work in the future is **likely** to revolve. Undoubtedly, this is where the book would begin, were I writing it today.

This positioning with respect to 'postmodernism' is surely as blunt a statement of closure as any ever offered by the most mechanical of **Marxisms**.⁴¹

Sandwiched between this opening gesture of goodwill toward post-structuralist feminism and this closing of the analytic book on all of those who might have the temerity to question the post-modern condition, are a series of retreats from the materialist arguments of her earlier, 1980, text. Barrett now repudiates her critique of the indiscriminate and ahistorical, descriptive use of the term 'patriarchy' among feminists, stating, 'I have come to regret the aggressive tone of my criticisms of this concept – and my own very limited definition of its appropriate use – in the first chapter of the original text.' One part of Barrett's earlier discontent with the use of patriarchy was its shading into a kind of biological essentialism, associated with the writings of Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone. But with the increasing influence of the radical feminism of Mary Daly, Andrea Dworkin, Dale Spender, and Adrienne Rich, the biological essentialism of the early 1970s has **come** back into vogue in the late 1980s: Barrett thus slides into acceptance of the recent feminist view of biological difference as 'an unadorned fact of existence.' She is also, not surprisingly, less captivated by the validity of class analysis, toying with a Foucauldian reading of power and its analytic possibilities.

The meaning of this, in terms of an author who used to situate herself sympathetically in relation to some variant of Marxism, is unambiguous. A hyphenated socialist-feminism has been split apart and the project of reconciling Marxism and feminism shelved. Poststructuralism, the ascent of radical feminism, and the writings of French feminists have, for Barrett, displaced the task of negotiating 'socialist-feminism with the issues of men and class.' Any alliance with Marxism is now 'very problematic.' Barrett's insistence that feminism is located within 'a liberal, humanist tradition' impale her on some awkward contradictions, for she appears to want to have the best of both the anti-humanist and humanist world views, but her ultimate reassessment of her earlier writing leaves no doubt about where she locates herself and her feminism in the late 1980s:

Finally, I **want** to add a word about the general philosophical climate of today in comparison with the one that **informed** the book's premises. Just as it would **be** impossible to write such a book without integrating a consideration of raasm and **ethnicity**, so it would, I think, be impossible to write in such a confidently materialist vein. At the very least one would have to defend the assumptions made about epistemology, the concept of ideology, the purchase of Marxist materialism, and the definition of the subject. Thus there would have to be a consideration of whether, for example, Foucault's suspension of epistemology and substitution of 'discourse' and 'regimes of **truth**' for a theory of ideology was to be accepted or not. There would have to be a consideration of the arguments, put forward by Ernesto **Laclau** and **Chantal Mouffe**, that the substantive arguments of a Marxist analysis of capitalism must be superseded. There would have to be an engagement with the arguments that the theory of the subject embodied in the text was, whilst not the universal male identification of bourgeois ideology, nevertheless still a conception unacceptably tainted by a humanist **perspective**.⁴²

Within the writing of social history the process exemplified by **Barrett** is unmistakable. Feminist histories are now more strongly hostile to Marxism and historical materialism than at any point in the post-1960 development of attention to gender. The extent to which poststructuralism has captivated the 'theoretical' side of feminist social histories is undoubtedly a significant factor in this newly-consolidating hostility to historical materialism and its insistence on material determination and the importance of class. To read the new French feminists – Kristeva, **Irigaray**, and **Cixous** – is to appreciate how distanced these writers are from **Marxism**.⁴³ Even within an Anglo-American feminist milieu, where poststructuralism is not part of the bedrock of engagement, the **dominant** analytic paradigm has shifted decidedly, the terms of feminist analysis now tilted unmistakably toward a one-sided emphasis on the ideological that runs its course in a fixation on the making of identities and the social constructedness of absolutely **everything**.⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, class and its material referents figure only peripherally, if at all, in this project. When two recent theorists **write that**, 'The **very** achievements of **Western** humanism have been built on the backs of women and people of color,' the lack of inclusion of the working class is more than accidental omission: it is a statement of political **programme**.⁴⁵ Indeed, if there is a prime mover that can be located within feminist histories of the **1980s**, both in terms of historiography and history itself, it is sexuality, a socially-constructed centre of power bounded by a rather timeless masculinist, patriarchal authority.

To address this literature in all of its complexity, attentive to the accomplishments and richness of various important studies, is beyond the capabilities of an article such as this. At the risk of **slighting** the important contributions made by various feminist histories in this **realm**,⁴⁶ let me single out a particular writer who exposes the analytical and political tendencies of feminist writing in the **1980s**, especially as this relates to historical materialism.

The choice of Jeffrey Weeks may seem an odd one. But it is not. Weeks represents the 'progressive' side of a debate among feminisms over sexuality and its discontents, standing, alongside of many women activists and authors, for the potential of sexual desire as opposed to a one-sided assertion of its dangers.⁴⁷ Attentive to the diversity of sexuality because of his status as a

gay activist, Weeks steps outside of the tendency to collapse the history of gender into the narrative of women's experience. Weeks is also theoretically attracted to post-structuralism, especially those Foucauldian strains that are currently quite important to feminist analyses. And as a male who has opted consciously for feminism, Weeks epitomizes a certain course increasingly common within both academia and the left.

Of those writers who have thus tackled the difficult area of gender in ways that draw most explicitly on poststructuralism, Weeks stands out as among the most self-consciously theoretical and the most relentless in his insistence that the sexual is the site of much of significance. Weeks draws on Foucault to argue that discourses of sexuality are central in any understanding of power in Western society. 'Sexuality is as much about words, images, ritual and fantasy as it is about the body,' notes Weeks in the first sentence of his *Sexuality and its Discontents*, and he goes on to claim that 'politics operate through metaphors.' Another text, *Sexuality*, opens with a chapter on 'The Languages of Sex.' His exploration of the history of sexuality follows Foucault in its insistence that sexualities are constructed and invented, a changing set of articulations that have nothing to do with nature and everything to do with power, its **consolidation**, and the ways in which it makes meanings and regulations pivotal in its project. Weeks takes as his starting point Foucault's blunt statement that sex is 'the truth of our being' and then turns it on its head, propelling us into what he calls a 'whirlwind of deconstruction.' What is this truth, he asks? On what basis is something natural or unnatural? Who 'laws' what is sexually **acceptable**?⁴⁸

Weeks has received little in the way of critical commentary. Precisely because he has pioneered the development of a new area of historical and sociological inquiry, an accomplishment enhanced by his sensible refusals of some of the outlandish positions espoused by radical (**separatist/lesbian**) feminists on matters such as heterosexuality as the enemy or a politics of antipornography that unites 'Moral Majority' and segments of the women's movement, Weeks is rightly championed among many leftists. His commitment to and engagement with the movement for gay rights, which extends in his writing into an unwillingness to sidestep difficult questions such as intergenerational sex (paedophilia) and the meaning of '**consent**,' insures that Weeks is warmly received in certain circles. There are signs, however, that his advocacy of a radical sexual pluralism sidesteps matters of importance, some in the gay milieu arguing that it submerges the specificities of homosexuality in a reformist sea of any and all sexualities. There is also no doubt that Weeks's focus on contemporary gay identity, a 'homosexual' community, and the political movements associated with these developments, collapses into the very essentialism he has long been at pains to challenge, an irony that does not escape the attention of Weeks **himself**.⁴⁹

These emerging areas of interpretive contestation are not unrelated to Weeks's fixation on sexuality as discourse. Among gay rights activists,

Weeks's embrace of radical pluralism (also Barrett's ultimate advocacy) and his Foucauldian insistence on the constructedness – and hence historically **transitory/mobile** meaning – of the 'homosexual' appears as a liberal evasion of both the particularities of oppression and the positive features of sexual-cultural life that both stigmatize homosexuality and allow for some small spaces of celebration and creativity, carved out of the dominant culture with much pain and effort. When Weeks, following basic post-structuralist premises, argues that because 'homosexuality' is a fragmented, volatile, constantly moving discourse and thus the category does not 'exist,' some gay writers react with hostility: their scepticism is rooted in a knowledge of how homophobic power is *Lived* and used against them as something more than **discourse/representation**.

Weeks himself is caught on the horns of this dilemma, for in spite of his theoretical dependency on this **kind** of Foucauldian scaffolding he is sufficiently embedded in the politics of gay activism to privilege gay identity. He does this by greatly understating the class-ridden character of this 'community.' When it was apparent at the beginnings of the AIDS crisis that a horrible disease was in fact ravaging gays and that its spread was somehow related to the commercialized commodification of sex concentrated in specific North American urban centres, it was the powerful, literally monopolistic, bathhouse and bar owners who blocked attempts on the part of gay activists to stop the drift to epidemic. Too much money was being made off of the back of gay sexuality for this capitalistic component of 'the community' to act against its class, as opposed to **cultural/sexual**, interests. In effect, the 'gay community,' long enclosed within the boundaries of capitalist America, succumbed to its own vision of itself as 'one,' as the 'Other,' and a tragic internalized popular **frontism** ran its course in the spread of a disease that ended up exacerbating homophobia, **killing** off whole realms of gay culture and sexuality, and decimating '**communities**' of sexual identity in San Francisco, Toronto, New York, and elsewhere. To use this **kind** of language is not to lapse into the sensationalized moral panic of the media, but to state a specific **kind** of reality and to reach for a particular sort of analysis. This is not to blame the main North American victims of AIDS in the 1980s, gay males, but to point to the necessity of political responses to threats that are simultaneously material (health and death) and social (heightened homophobia and repression). It is also to reassert the basic connectedness of the economic and the cultural, and to point to the futility of a politics that ignores this **link**.⁵⁰

Weeks's writing thus oscillates uneasily between its theoretical fixation and fixedness on sexuality as discourse, and all of the ramifications that this positioning entails, and its political acknowledgement that 'sex does not unproblematically speak its own truth,' and that those subjected to the categories and definitions of discourses of sexuality 'have taken and used the definitions for their own **purposes**.'⁵¹ Where this ambivalence manifests itself

most pointedly is in Weeks's failure actually to probe this history of human agency and his willingness to lapse analytically all too easily into the more accessible 'texts' of sexology, psychoanalysis, and other writings concerned with sex. Like Foucault, Weeks has his surrogates, which become the history of sexuality.

Within **this** substitutionism, recognition of the importance of class sometimes appears, but partially and often with vital **qualifications**.⁵² Weeks is quick to pillory '**class** reductionism,' but he is slow to address the material embeddedness of sexuality, save for the extent to which it relates to the proliferation of commodified sexuality in the post-World War II epoch. Class does not even enter into Weeks's list of 'the really fundamental issues around sexuality today: the social nature of identity, the criteria for sexual choice, the meaning of pleasure and consent, and the relations between sexuality and power.' Attentive to the unconscious to the extent that it is the site of desire and repression, Weeks cannot bring himself to see this realm as constructed, in part, out of the material world of actual, economically determined social relations. The hidden injuries of class are somehow all too peripheral in the **making** of sexualities and their many meanings.⁵³

To say all of this is not to suggest that the sexual can be reduced to the economic. It is to claim that the two **cannot** be divorced and their relationship tossed off with a slap in the face of crude determinism. Yet this is what Weeks's Foucauldian framework allows him to do. Power can never be located, and resides always in the determinations of discourse, which spins itself in a never-ending and analytically and politically impenetrable **Lacanian** circularity: 'Society does not influence an autonomous individual; on the contrary the individual is constituted in the world of language and symbols, which come to dwell in, and constitute, the individual.' With this **kind** of theoretical focus, it is not surprising that Weeks can gravitate politically to what he calls a radical sexual pluralism; nor is it inconsistent for him to embrace what can only be regarded as a naive voluntarism. 'We have the chance to regain control of our bodies,' he ends a recent book, 'to **recognise** their potentialities to the full, to take ourselves beyond the boundaries of sexuality as we know it. All we need is the political commitment, imagination and vision. The future now, as ever, is in our **hands**.'⁵⁴ Yet if sex does indeed not speak its own truth, the potentialities and control Weeks and others seek will never be attained by a focus on it, and its discourses, alone. Bodies are never just the property of their occupants: they must labour and live through exploitation, alienation, and oppression. Sex is never just a process in the hands of those who are living it, doing it: sex is always unfolding within sets of determinations. Weeks avoids such relationships – among **sex/not sex, discourse/not** discourse – that are central to the possibilities of a human condition that reaches beyond many boundaries, those of sexuality among them. Historical materialism would tell you this much; Weeks, among many others, is not listening to its message.

What does this particularistic focus have to do with feminist social history writ large? In a word everything, for Weeks, like Barrett, is nothing less than a sign of the times. What he emphasizes has become the emphasis of feminist social history. What he loses sight of is, within this writing, not worth seeing. We can appreciate the generality of the problematic eclipse of materialism by considering, first, an analytic tendency, and, second, by closing this discussion with a look at two recent post-structurally-inclined feminist 'histories'.

Let us begin with a current analytic trend, spawned and perpetuated by feminist sensitivities. This trend is but a subset of the penchant to grant ideology increasing weightiness and determinative capacities and to understate the severe limitations imposed by mundane, material reality. It involves the virtually unquestioned 'social' or subjective construction of virtually everything, from gender itself to documentary reality. Feminist scholarship in general and feminist historical writing in particular, for all the differentiations of varied 'feminisms,' has occupied a central place in this influential process. 'Second wave' feminism was in part mobilized around the premise that the personal is political, and many feminists have pointed out how this perspective in fact anticipated many of the positions about the discursiveness of power associated with a Foucauldian reading of institutions, knowledges, and historical discourses. Under feminist scrutiny the explanatory authority of orthodox historical materialism, with its concerns located in economic and class structures, often appeared inadequate, as did the strategic emphasis placed on a vanguard party that was increasingly dismissed as a male form. The pervasive power of masculinist perspectives and constructions took on new and enhanced meaning, simultaneously destabilizing and decentring the conception of power and adding new interpretive weight to the ubiquitous realm of the **ideological**.⁵⁵

It is possible to oppose this often one-sided stress on the ideological without falling prey to Barrett's rather sectarian caricature of Marxism's historical handling of the ideological realm. For Barrett the deficiencies of historical materialism are easily identified. 'In practice,' she declares, 'there is no way in which orthodox Marxists will accept any serious consideration of **ideology**.'⁵⁶ Consideration of the recent focus on the social construction of skill, especially as it pertains to gender relations, allows entry into precisely this question that Barrett answers so decisively, and, so simple mindedly.

Where class and gender habitually now meet, for instance, is along the ideological axis of skill as the constructed site of difference and male dominance, in which skill is depicted as little more than the capacity of powerful male workers to define their jobs as the preserve of men against women. In the words of two often-cited feminist theorists: 'Skill definitions are saturated with sexual bias. The work of women is often deemed inferior simply because it is women who do it.'⁵⁷

The point is not to approach the relation of skill, gender, and class with one's resolutely historical materialist eyes closed to the ideological

forces at work, as **Barrett** concludes all orthodox Marxists will. It would be foolhardy to rebut the role of ideology in the making of the undeniable reality of labour market segmentation in which gender figures forcefully, nor would it be productive to deny the ways in which skill is defined and defended in the **context** of gender relations. As far as this recent feminist sensibility to skill's construction has taken us in new and critically important directions, however, it has also skewed the treatment of skill, pressuring its conceptualization ideologically to the detriment of a more nuanced materialist reading cognizant of the two-sidedness of **skill's making** within the processes of **production/reproduction** and its consequences – often ambiguous – for class and gender relations. It has also tended toward an ahistorical assessment, the much-studied cauldron of sexual antagonism pitting skilled male labour against an 'intruding' lot of unskilled women in the **tailoring/seamstress** trade of the pre-1850 years. Yet to generalize from this experience across time, as is often done, understates the highly differentiated histories of context-bound **skills**, drawing too selectively on relations in a particular trade that was closely associated with the domestic arena – thus perhaps forced into a defensiveness around questions of intraclass, gender-defined relations of subordination – and acutely aware of the perilous incursions of petty technologies and debasing reorganizations of **work**.⁵⁸

This historically contextualized two-sidedness of **skill** was grasped much more forcefully by Marx than is currently readily acknowledged by those advocating understanding **skill** as social construction. Marx anticipated the argument of some contemporary feminists when he noted in Volume I of *Capital*:

The distinction between **skilled** and **unskilled** labour rests in part on pure illusion, or, to say the least, on distinctions that have long since ceased to be real, and that survive only by virtue of a traditional convention; in part on the helpless condition of some groups of the **working class**, a condition that prevents them from exacting equally with the rest the value of their **labour-power**.⁵⁹

Yet **Marx** was also capable of understanding that skill is only in part illusory, that its reality is constructed, not only **ideologically**, but also in the material realm of historically changing production, representing, again, in part, a substantive side of the never-ceasing process of accumulation with important ramifications for workers as a class counterposed to the bourgeoisie:

The accumulation of the **skill** and knowledge (scientific power) of the workers themselves is the chief form of accumulation, and infinitely more important than the accumulation – which goes hand in hand with it and merely represents it – of the *existing objective* conditions of this accumulated activity. These objective conditions are only nominally accumulated and must be constantly produced and consumed anew.

And in this ongoing production, consumption, and renewal of skill lay much of the history of class struggle and **class/gender** fragmentation. To slide past this history of skill on a skidding discourse-like theory of a timeless social construction of absolutely everything is to ensure that you find yourself

at a particular **end**.⁶⁰ We glimpse that end in the recent writings of two post-structuralist feminist historians: Denise Riley and Joan Wallach Scott.

Riley explores feminism and the category of 'woman,' shattering historical time, ranging across centuries to echo Lacanian notions of 'women's' fictive status and a Demdean grasp of the 'undecidability' of 'woman.' She replaces Sojourner Truth's 1851 refrain 'Ain't I a woman?' with the rather more cumbersome 'Ain't I a fluctuating identity?' In Riley's view, there is no historically continuous 'woman' or 'women'; rather 'woman' is 'discursively constructed, and always relatively to other categories which themselves change.' 'History' itself is not an unproblematic category – this stands as nothing less than a foundation of most poststructuralist thought – and Riley's positioning **vis-à-vis** history is appropriately ambivalent, marked by the ubiquitous quotation marks: 'It is the misleading familiarity of "history" which can break open the daily naturalism of what surrounds us.'⁶¹

My complaint here is not with Riley's basic questioning of the meaning of 'woman,' or her interrogation of historical practice. Rather, my discontent is with her reification of the category as history itself, a conceptual point of departure that allows her to simplify and distort a history she wants to claim needs to be made more complex. The result is a history with a feminist political message, but a history that is unfortunately one-dimensional and unconvincing.

Riley's *Am I That Name* is dedicated to Joan Scott. This should come as no surprise, for no feminist historian has argued the case for post-structuralism more strenuously than Scott, who has attained an unrivalled stature within certain circles. Scott, like Barrett, is an indication of which ways the winds of interpretation are blowing within academic feminist circles. When it was fashionable to espouse 'Thompsonianism' in the **1970s**, Scott was one of its most unquestioning advocates, framing her own work within it and pillorying those who did not, according to her, deliver its promise. In her early writing, feminism's impact is simply non-existent, and as late as 1980 Scott **could** co-author, with the British Marxist historian E.J. Hobsbawm, an essay on political shoemakers that studiously avoided gender. Indeed, in a recent interview in the *Radical History Review*, we get a clue as to what in part lies behind the making of Joan Scott. Discussing her background in the left teachers' community of New York City, where her father was victimized during the **McCarthyite** repression, Scott concludes: 'The formative lesson of those years for me was less an abiding Marxism than it was an abiding political mentality.' It was in the 1980s and under the influence of feminist literary theorists, that Scott began to distance herself overtly from anything smacking of Marxism, including so-called Thompsonianism.⁶²

Scott's essays of the 1980s have recently been gathered together in *Gender and the Politics of Hkory*. They contain much of interest and value, but in their promotion of a post-structural feminism that consciously dismisses Marxism and historical materialism some undeniable problems intrude. First,

in spite of Scott's newly-articulated antagonism to Marxism and the extent to which her essays are marketed as a rich and invigorating source challenging historical materialism, it is apparent that Scott's engagement with Marxism is cavalier and caricatured: like much of North American mainstream historiography, what Scott does not know about Marxism, or what she mistakenly assumes concerning it, is far more telling than any supposed critique that emerges from her **work**.⁶³ Scott is more concerned with what she considers to be the controversies and problems flowing out of attempts to merge Marxism and feminism than she is with a sustained discussion of Marxist-feminism itself. She notes that 'the English have had greater difficulty in challenging the constraints of strictly deterministic explanations,' citing an extensive literature that developed in response to Barrett's 1980 edition of *Women's Oppression Today*, but she neglects substantive contact with the Barrett text itself. Indeed, Scott is incapable of discussing Marxism without pillorying crude determinism. She seems to misread Juliet Mitchell's recent reflections on feminism and the need to address the material realm as an overt attempt to dichotomize psychoanalytic and materialistic analyses of gender when Mitchell undoubtedly means to posit no such opposition. The point of **Mitchell's** essay is simply that the material must be addressed more rigorously than it often is in feminist circles, a recognition of just how much it determines. It is not a rejection of psychoanalysis, which Mitchell always conceived as a way into the materiality of the unconscious. As an indication of just how skewed is Scott's understanding of what is at stake in the relationship of Marxism and the writing of social history, consider this recent statement. 'Social history is more deterministic,' she argues, 'when it posits economic or material causes for human actions; some Marxists, for example, see class consciousness immanent in relations of production. Although their histories may focus on the heroism of workers, the determinants of worker action are placed elsewhere.' This rather strained depiction of Marxist social histories, which typically carries no concrete citation of any actual writing, is then followed by a **corrective**. **Scott** poses the novel argument that human agency is in fact action taken in specific contexts but not without constraint, as if this insight was not precisely what **Marx's** *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Thompson's histories, and Williams' theorizing were all **about**.⁶⁴

Second, if Scott's theoretical engagement with Marxism is partial and inadequate, her own project of **theorizing** feminism through **adoption** of **post-structuralism** is no better. Her gravitation toward the implosion of theory, in both its acceleration over the last few years and in its rather quick grasp of what is at stake in the – for her – mainly French fragments of **critical theory**, is instructive in exposing the promise and problem of reinterpreting gender through the lens of **poststructuralism**.⁶⁵ Even highly sympathetic feminist colleagues have pointed out that Scott's brisk partisanship 'mysteriously exempts [poststructuralism] from critical dissection, employing it instead as

a toolbox from which theories can be picked up and applied to historical problems.' When Scott reduces deconstruction to a project summed up by its understanding of 'the production of meaning. . . as a political process,' she is surely simplifying what deconstructionists have been about for the last three decades and, if she is right, how far does this take us beyond **Marx's** insistence that, 'The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas. . . the ideas of **dominance?**'⁶⁶ In her recent work Scott is at pains to deal with meaning, reality, authorial intention, and textual discourse, but in doing so she usually lapses into the very binary oppositions questioned by the poststructuralism she champions, an analytic positioning that allows her to embrace a universalistic feminist accomplishment. It also conditions a history that, as Claudia **Koonz** suggests, bypasses the complexity of women's experience in its articulation of the representation of women. Theoretically, this problem is addressed frontally in the writings of Jane **Flax** and Deborah Cameron, both of whom stand for a feminism attentive to discourse but conscious of the material boundaries within which language and signification develop. Empirically it virtually leaps off the pages of Scott's current historical writing and historiographic reevaluations, leading us toward the third problematic feature of her poststructuralist **crusade**.⁶⁷

For in the stress on representation, Scott is led to some rather dubious conclusions, especially from the vantage point of historical materialism. Consider, for instance, her comments on discourse, Chartism, and the working-class family. 'The version of class that Chartists espoused,' she writes with confidence, 'affirmed a **working-class** family structure resembling middle-class ideals and susceptible to middle-class pressures: a family organization that no later radical theories of economics managed entirely to displace. From this perspective the **working-class** family was created within working-class political discourse, by the particular gendered conception of class evident in (though not invented by) the Chartist **program**.'⁶⁸ This argument is so thoroughly idealist and ahistorical in its premises of causality that it leaves one gasping for intellectual breath. So, too, does Scott's critique of Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class*. In 'Women in *The Making of the English Working Class*,' the only previously unpublished essay to appear in *Gender and the Politics of History*, Scott subjects Thompson's book to a deconstructionist feminist challenge in which the legitimate project of questioning the text's gendered discussion of class formation is submerged in strained misreadings of specific passages, explicit distortion of Thompson's meanings, and a questionable dichotomization of women's expressivity and men's **rationality**.⁶⁹

Out of this theoretical and empirical set of difficulties emerges the final, problematic area of Scott's recent 'linguistic turn.' What are the politics of this poststructuralist feminist history? One comes away from Scott's assessment of women in *The Making of the English Working Class* quite shaken about the political meanings of a deconstructive feminism. Real women, the

repositories of sexual difference, are expressive, domestic, spiritual, religious, undisciplined, and irrational, coded as feminine. Radical women, secular, combative, and rational, are depicted as the **intellectual/political** equivalents of men in public drag, coded, for all of their superficial disguise, as masculine. The awkward complexities of actual women, often situated within sets of paradoxes and battling against the numerous 'constructions' of their lives, remain all too little appreciated in Scott's rereading of Thompson's text and in her gestures toward politics.

Within Scott's new collection of essays, where politics are constantly alluded to, no space is actually more vacant and vacuously underdeveloped than the *political*. Scott appears a particular case of a general problem located by the literary critic Barbara Foley: 'there is an urgent necessity for literary critics to examine more closely the concept of the "political" as it applies to our investigations. We are quite willing these days to admit that all discursive activity is in some sense political, but we are ordinarily imprecise, even naive, when actual political questions arise.' What Foley is suggesting is that discourse theory, whatever its analytic potential, will not resolve a host of political matters, which are linked to larger and more potent structures of oppression, exploitation, and organization. But this context of discourse and not-discourse is actually obscured by Scott's view of politics as 'the process by which plays of power and knowledge constitute identity and experience,' a rather circular conception given her insistence on knowledge's all-encompassing and determining capacities.⁷⁰

Barrett and Scott, Riley and Weeks. The list could be extended indefinitely. These are representative texts because, even granting feminism's many and diverse faces, they capture a specific drift that has accelerated and grown more influential over the course of the 1980s. That drift is against the long-standing currents of historical materialism and these authors, in their emphases, realignments, and theoretical focus have both constructed feminism in opposition to Marxism and reflect mainstream feminism's increasingly hostile attitude toward historical materialism. It is of course not the case that these trends and writers are unopposed, and there are those within the highly differentiated body of thought associated with feminism that cultivate positions more compatible with materialism. But these are minority voices within feminism's variegated project. For much of feminism, Marxism is a burden that it no longer wants even to try to carry. It welcomes the eclipse of materialism as a liberation at the same time as it founders in the analytic and political darkness of current fashion.

To Be A Historian, To Be A Historical Materialist. . .

These are not good times to be a historian, not good times to be a historical materialist. Politically, there can be no denying the hegemony of the Right and its ideas, both in the capitalist West and the East of actually existing, but disintegrating, Stalinist socialism. Intellectually, there has not been a time in

the post-World War II epoch when an irrationalist hostility to and denigration of history has so tenaciously gripped the very neck of bourgeois thought. Poststructuralism, in Ellen Wood's words, constructs a politics 'detached from the anchor of history. . . where rhetoric and discourse are the agencies of social change.' These political and intellectual trends have overwhelmed the populist left and infiltrated whole realms of ostensibly Marxist writing, converging in 'a cynical defeatism, where every radical programme of change is doomed to failure.' Their **conjuncture** is not accidental. As Perry Anderson noted more than a decade ago, 'Marxist theory. . . acquires its proper contours only in direct relation to a mass revolutionary movement. When the latter is effectively absent or defeated, the former is inevitably deformed or eclipsed.'⁷⁷ The **1980s** has been a decade in which much has been eclipsed, and in the developing darkness much necessarily lost sight of. Receding from view, essential processes, especially those of determinative causalities and the relationship of the past, present, and future, have been not just forgotten, but delegitimized. The result is a time in which, to quote the *Communist Manifesto*, 'All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned,' but it is not a time in which men and women, most emphatically not those men and women writing social history, have seemed **compelled** to 'face with sober senses [the] real conditions of life.'⁷⁸ The political defeats of the international workers movement are preminent in this plunge into chaos and obscurantism, especially as it is registered in Marxist theory, but the conscious adoption of ideas and analysis antagonistic to historical materialism cannot be discounted as unimportant. To be a historian, to be a historical materialist, is necessarily to register certain refusals in the face of those many and influential forces that have gathered in the darkness of the **1980s**, clamouring for new lights of interpretive insight and political practice that illuminate, in the end, nothing so much as their own accommodation to the pressures of the moment. To stake out this elementary ground of opposition is, of course, to court curt dismissals and nasty excommunications. But it is time for historians, for historical materialists, to begin fighting back. The 1990s will be many things. Let them not, at least, be further years of eclipse in which we ourselves remain open-mouthed, wide-eyed, and silent.

NOTES

1. This kind of thing has been said before, but the extent to which the situation has actually worsened rather than improved is striking. Note, for earlier statements, Tony Judt, 'A Clown in Regal Purple: Social History and the Historians,' *History Workshop Journal*, 7 (Spring 1979), pp. 66-94; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, 'The Political Crisis of Social History: A Marxian Perspective,' *Journal of Social History*, 10 (Winter 1976), pp. 205-220.
2. I have attempted to criticize one part of this process in a discussion of 'critical theory' and its current influence in the writing of social history. See Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of*

Social History (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1990), a text that I draw upon liberally in what follows.

3. See Ralph **Miliband**, 'Reflections on the Crisis of Communist Regimes,' *New Left Review*, 177 (September-October 1989), pp. 27-36.
4. Quoted in 'How the West is Winning,' and elaborated on in Richard Bernstein, 'Judging "Post-History,"' The Theory to End All Theories,' *New York Times*, 'Ideas & Trends,' 27 August 1989.
5. Sande Cohen, *Historical Culture: On the Recoding of an Academic Discipline* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1988), p. 1.
6. See **Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak**, 'A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World,' in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge 1988), pp. 241-42; Michael Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction: A Critical Articulation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1982). For forceful criticism of the **Ryan-Spivak** positions & **Barbara Foley**, 'The Politics of Deconstruction,' in Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer, eds., *Rhetoric and Form: Deconstruction at Yale* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press 1985), pp. 113-114. Note, as well, Nancy Fraser, 'The French Derrideans: Politicizing Deconstruction or Deconstructing Politics,' *New German Critique*, 33 (Fall 1984), esp. 129; Terry Eagleton, 'Frère Jacques: The Politics of Deconstruction,' in Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Selected Essays, 1975-1985* (London: Verso 1986), pp. 7 w .
7. The quote is from Hindess and **Hirst**, cited in Thompson, 'The Poverty of Theory: or, an Orrery of Errors,' in *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (London: Merlin 1978), p. 194.
8. I borrow this phrase from Peter Dews' impressive *The Logics of Disintegration: Post-structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso 1987).
9. On the Thompson industry see, as a beginning only: Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London: Verso 1980); Bryan D. Palmer, *The Making of E. P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press 1981); Paul Q. Hirst, *Marxism and Historical Writing* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1985); Gregor **McLennan**, 'E. P. Thompson and the Discipline of Historical Context,' in Richard Johnson, et al., eds., *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics* (London: Hutchinson 1982); **Allan Dawley**, 'E. P. Thompson and the Peculiarities of the Americans,' *Radical History Review*, 19 (Winter 1978-79), pp. 33-60; F. K. **Donnelly**, 'Ideology and Early English Working-Class History: Edward Thompson and His Critics,' *Social History*, 2 (May 1976), pp. 219-238; Richard Johnson, 'Thompson, Genovese, and Socialist-Humanist History,' *History Workshop Journal*, 6 (Autumn 1978), pp. 79-100; Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1984), pp. 167-220; Craig Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism during the Industrial Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1982); and Harvey J. Kaye and Keith **McClelland**, ed., *E. P. Thompson: Critical Debates* (Cambridge: Polity Press, forthcoming 1990).
10. Quotes in the above paragraphs from E. P. Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines,' *The New Reasoner: A Quarterly Journal of Socialist Humanism*, 1 (Summer 1957), esp. pp. 113-114; 'Revolution Again! Or Shut Your Ears and Run,' *New Left Review*, 6 (November-December 1960), pp. 18-31; Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (New York: Pantheon 1975), p. 260; Thompson, 'Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class?' *Social History*, 3 (May 1978), p. 149; Thompson, 'The Politics of Theory,' in Raphael Samuel, *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1981). pp. 3-397. The most explicit Johnsonian

statement on the so-called 'moment of culture' is: 'Culture and the historians,' in John Clarke, **Chas Critcher** and Richard Johnson, ed., *Working Class Culture*, pp. 41–71.

11. For Thompson's early critical engagement with Williams see 'The Long Revolution I,' and 'The Long Revolution II,' *New Left Review*, 9 (May–June 1961), pp. 24–33; 10 (July–August 1961), pp. 34–39. Williams **recollects** his reaction to this critique in Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: Verso 1979), pp. 134–136. The quote is from *ibid.*, p. 353.
12. See Interview with 'E. P. Thompson,' in Henry Abelove et al., ed., *Visions of History* (New York: Pantheon 1983), p. 22.
13. For an introductory overview see Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1984).
14. William M. Reddy, *Money & Liberty in Modern Europe: a Critique of Historical Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987), p. 203.
15. Michael **Kazin**, 'A People Not a Class: Rethinking the Political Language of the Modern U.S. Labor Movement,' in Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker, eds., *Reshaping the U.S. Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980s* (London: Verso 1988), pp. 257–286, esp. pp. 257–259. For other **Kazin** pronouncements, all variations on a common theme, see 'The Limits of the Workplace,' in 'A Symposium on *The Fall of the House of Labor*,' *Labor History*, 30 (1989), pp. 110–113; and 'The New Historians Recapture the Flag,' *New York Times Book Review*, 2 July 1989.
16. Among right-wing historians who have provided particularly crude dismissals of class see Norman **McCord**, 'A Touch of Class,' *History*, 70 (1985), esp. pp. 412–419; and Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old: Critical Essays and Reappraisals* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1987). Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat From Class: A New 'True' Socialism* (London: Verso 1986) dissected deftly the left-leaning rejection of class a few years ago, but her sharp **polemic** did little to stop the fashionable escape from materialism.
17. Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1983), esp. pp. 20–21, 256.
18. The literature posed against Stedman Jones's **Chartism** essay is now considerable. See, for a beginning: Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, esp. pp. 128–133; Wood, *The Retreat from Class*, pp. 102–115; John Foster, 'The Declassing of Language,' *New Left Review*, 150 (March–April 1985), pp. 29–46; Paul A. Pickering, 'Class without Words: Symbolic Communication in the Chartist Movement,' *Past & Present*, 112 (August 1986), pp. 144–162; Joan Scott, 'On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History,' *International Labor and Working Class History*, 31 (Spring 1987), and the responses to Scott by Palmer, **Stansell**, and Rabinbach, pp. 1–36; Dorothy Thompson, 'The Languages of Class,' *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 52 (No. 1 1987), pp. 54–57; Neville Kirk, 'In Defence of Class: A Critique of Recent Revisionist Writing on the Nineteenth-Century Working Class,' *International Review of Social History*, 32 (1987), pp. 2–47; Robert Gray, 'The Deconstructing of the English Working Class,' *Social History*, 11 (October 1986), pp. 363–373; James Epstein, 'Rethinking the Categories of Working Class History,' *Labour/Le Travail*, 18 (Fall 1986), pp. 195–208; Epstein, 'Understanding the Cap of Liberty: Symbolic Practice and Social Conflict in Early Nineteenth-Century England,' *Past & Present*, 122 (February 1989), pp. 75–118; Nicholas Rogers, 'Chartism and Class Struggle,' *Labour/Le Travail*, 19 (Spring 1987), pp. 143–152; Christopher Clark, 'Politics, Language, and Class,' *Radical History Review*, 34 (1986), pp. 78–86.

19. See, for instance, Leon Fink, 'The New Labor History and the Powers of Historical Pessimism: Consensus, Hegemony, and the Case of the Knights of Labor,' *Journal of American History*, 75 (June 1988), pp. 121, 123-124; Gray, 'Deconstructing the English Working Class,' p. 373; Ira Berlin and Herbert G. Gutman, 'Class Composition and the Development of the American Working Class, 1840-1890,' in Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class* (New York: Pantheon 1987), pp. 381-382; Sean Wilentz, 'Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790-1920,' *International Labor and Working Class History*, 26 (1984), pp. 1-24; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press 1984), p. 16. It is of course hardly surprising that Michael Kazin embraces the Stedman Jones approach in 'A People Not a Class,' p. 282, n. 2.
20. See, among others: André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism* (London: Pluto 1982); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso 1985); Gavin Kitching, *Rethinking Socialism: A Theory for a Better Practice* (London: Methuen 1983); Kitching, *Karl Marx and the Philosophy of Practice* (London: Routledge 1988).
21. See, for instance, Gareth Stedman Jones, 'The Pathology of English History,' *New Left Review*, 44 (July-August 1967), pp. 29-44; 'The Marxism of the Early Lukacs,' in *New Left Review*, ed., *Western Marxism: A Critical Reader* (London: Verso 1978), pp. 11-60.
22. See, for example, Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists: Popular Politics in the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Pantheon 1984); Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880-1900* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press 1987).
23. This is central to Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*. But note as well Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1988), pp. 522-572.
24. Wood, *Retreat from Class*, pp. 180-181.
25. Michael Ignatieff, 'Strangers and Comrades,' *New Statesman*, 14 December 1984. For other views see Raphael Samuel's reply in *New Statesman*, 11 January 1985; Huw Benyon, ed., *Digging Deeper: Issues in the Miners' Strike* (London: Verso 1985).
26. Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers: An Essay on Privacy, Solidarity, and the Politics of Being Human* (New York: Viking 1984), pp. 141-142.
27. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International 1969), p. 193.
28. Michael Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Pantheon 1978).
29. See, among many other studies: William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1980), pp. 7-40; G. Ellis, "'The Marxist Interpretation' of the French Revolution," *English Historical Review*, 90 (1978), pp. 353-376; François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981); George C. Comminel, *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge* (London: Verso 1987). Note the recent discussion in Michael Löwy, "'The Poetry of the Past": Marx and the French Revolution,' *New Left Review*, 177 (September-October 1989), pp. 111-124, a source that came to my attention too late to influence the following discussion.
30. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, 'Bourgeoisie and Counter-Revolution,' cited in Gerard Bekerman, *Marx and Engels: A Conceptual Concordance* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1983), p. 153. The importance of this passage is noted in Michael Löwy,

- The *Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution* (London: Verso 1981), p. 3.
31. Lefebvre's most influential book is **undoubtedly** *The Coming of the French Revolution* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press 1947), although it could be argued that his most impressive writing focused on the peasantry and rural panic on the eve of 1789. See Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France* (London: New Left Books 1973). Note as well Lefebvre, *The Directory* (New York: Vintage, 1967); Lefebvre, *Napoleon: From Eighteen Brumaire to Tilsit, 1799–1807* (New York: Columbia University Press 1969). Soboul is justifiably known as **the** historian of the Parisian sans-dulottes on the basis of *The Parisian Sans Culottes and the French Revolution, 1793–1794* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1964), but see as well his two-volume history, *The French Revolution, 1789–1799* (London: New Left Books 1974). For **portraits** of Lefebvre and Soboul from their closest non-Marxist collaborator, Richard Cobb, see 'Georges Lefebvre,' in Cobb, *A Second Identity: Essays on France and French History* (London: Oxford University Press 1969), pp. 84–100; 'Albert-Marius Soboul: A Tribute,' in Cobb, *People and Places* (New York: Oxford University Press 1986), pp. 46–92.
 32. The most precise statements are found in Alfred **Cobban**, *Aspects of the French Revolution* (London: Paladin 1971), especially the essay entitled, 'The Myth of the French Revolution.' Even as astute a Marxist commentator as **Comménil**, *Rethinking the French Revolution* is unduly deferential to this Cobban-inspired revisionism.
 33. Karl Marx, 'Preface to the Critique of Political Economy,' in Marx and **Engels**, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress 1968), p. 183; Karl Marx, *The Holy Family* (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1956), pp. 160–167; and *Deutsche Brüsseler Zeitung*, 11 November 1847, quoted in **Shlomo Avineri**, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1968), p. 191. On **Jacobinism** see, as well, Ferenc Feher, *The Frozen Revolution: An Essay on Jacobinism* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1987).
 34. Trotsky's **discussion** of '**Jacobinism** and **Social Democracy**' forms the final chapter of *Our Political Tasks* (1904), written as a Menshevik **polemic** against Lenin. See Baruch **Knei-Paz**, *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1978), pp. 199–206; Tony Cliff, *Trotsky: I. Towards October, 1879–1917* (London: Bookmarks 1989), pp. 60–63; Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International 1971), pp. 77–79; Walter L. **Adamson**, *Hegemony and Revolution: Antonio Gramsci's Political and Cultural Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1980), pp. 184–188; Marx, *Holy Family*, pp. 164–165.
 35. For a sensitive critique of Soboul see Michael Sonenscher, 'The Sans-Culottes in the Year II: Rethinking the Language of Labour in Revolutionary France,' *Social History*, 9 (October 1984), pp. 301–328.
 36. Note the forceful discussion in Elizabeth **Fox-Genovese** and Eugene D. **Genovese**, 'On the Social History of the French Revolution,' in *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1983), pp. 213–248.
 37. Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, esp. 85–89, 91.
 38. Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, pp. 90–91, contrasted with Soboul, *The Sans Culottes: The Popular Movement and Revolutionary Government, 1793–1794* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday 1972), pp. 251–264.
 39. Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, pp. 63, 27, 54.
 40. Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (London: Methuen 1986), pp. 12–13, 23–26, 35–51, 177, 147.

41. **Michèle Barrett**, *Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter* (London: Verso 1988), pp. v-vi (Spivak) and xxxiv (quote).
42. Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today* (1988), pp. xxii, xviii-xix, xxii-xxiii, xxiv, xxxiii.
43. Different discussion of this trio and introduction to the Literature on French feminism can be found in Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Boulder and San Francisco: Westview Press 1989), pp. 217-233.
44. See, for instance, Dorothy E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1987); Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford, *Masculinity: Unwrapping Masculinity* (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1988); **Celia Kitzinger**, *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* (London: Sage 1989).
45. Irene Diamond and Lee **Quinby**, ed., *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance* (Boston: Northeastern University Press 1988), p. xv.
46. Among some impressive recent works see AM **Snitow** et al., ed., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review 1983); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf 1986); Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons, ed., *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1989).
47. This sex debate has an extensive literature. For an introduction to its content see **Varda Burstyn**, ed., *Women Against Censorship* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre 1985); and Catharine A. **MacKinnon**, 'Desire and Power: A Feminist Perspective,' as well as the discussion of this essay in **Cary Nelson** and Lawrence Grossberg, ed., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1988), pp. 105-121.
48. Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents: Meanings, Myths, and Modern Sexualities* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), pp. 3, 6, 17; Weeks, *Sexuality* (London: Tavistock 1986), p. 13.
49. For an indication of a critique of Weeks's radical pluralism see Bryan Bruce, 'Modem Diseases: Gay Self-Representation in the Age of AIDS,' *cineACTION*, 15 (Winter 1988-89), esp. pp. 30, 37, drawing upon Leo **Bersani** 'Is the Rectum a Grave,' in *October* #43 (Cambridge: MIT Press 1987), esp. pp. 205, 219. My thanks to Steven Maynard, who does not agree with all of my arguments, for bringing this source to my attention. On essentialism see especially Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents*, pp. 185-195.
50. Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St. Martin's Press 1987). I am aware that this text is not an **unproblematic** source, weighted down as it is with a kind of journalistic moralism and sensationalism. Nevertheless, it shows clearly the class-ridden character of the gay community and relates these class divisions to the beginnings of the spread of AIDS. For accounts of AIDS more amenable to gay activists see Cindy **Patton**, *Sex and Germs: The Politics of AIDS* (Montreal: Black Rose Books 1986); Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media* (London: Methuen 1987).
51. Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents*, pp. 56, 170.
52. Note Weeks, *Sexuality*, pp. 37-38.
53. Note Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents*, pp. 56, 170. Another reading appears in Reimut Reiche, *Sexuality and Class Struggle* (London: New Left Books 1970).
54. Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents*, pp. 170-171, 260; Weeks, *Sexuality*, p. 37. Both Weeks's endorsement of radical sexual pluralism and his unduly voluntarist and overly subjective assessment of what is politically possible relate to positions espoused by Foucault. First, Foucault's political trajectory was toward classical liberalism. See 'Polemics, Politics, and Problemizations: An Interview with Michel

- Foucault,' in Paul **Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader*** (New York: **Hill and Wang** 1984). Second, **note** Foucault's statement that 'It is possible that the rough outline of a future society is supplied by the recent experiences with **drugs**, sex, communes, other forms of consciousness and other forms of individuality. If scientific socialism emerged **from** the Utopias of the nineteenth century, it is possible that a real socialization **will** emerge, in the twentieth century, from experiences.' Michel Foucault, ***Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews***, ed., by Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, N. Y.: **Cornell University Press 1977**), p. 231, quoted in J. G. Merquoir, ***Foucault*** (Berkeley: University of California Press **1985**), pp. 154-155.
55. Perhaps one of the most influential early statements was Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne **Segal**, and Hilary Wainwright, ***Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism*** (London: Merlin 1979).
56. Barrett, ***Women's Oppression Today*** (1988), p. xviii.
57. Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, 'Sex and **Skill**: Notes Towards a Feminist Economics,' ***Feminist Review***, 6 (1980), pp. 79-83. For a more nuanced, but decidedly feminist, approach to the same issue, see Sylvia Walby, ***Patriarchy at Work: Patriarchal and Capitalist Relations in Employment*** (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1986).
58. See the important studies: Barbara Taylor, "'The Men Are as Bad as Their Masters. . .': Socialism, Feminism, and Sexual Antagonism in the London Tailoring Trades in the **1830s**,' in Judith Newton, Mary Ryan, and Judith Walkowitz, ed., ***Sex and Class in Women's History*** (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1983), pp. 187-220; Joan **Wallach** Scott, 'Men and Women in the Parisian Garment Trades: Discussions of Family and Work in the 1830s and **1840s**,' in Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossick, and Roderick **Flood**, ed., ***The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983), pp. 67-94. Christine Stansell, ***City of Women***, pp. 130-154 offers some commentary that is both fascinating and problematic for my argument.
59. Quoted in Gerard Bekerman, ***Marx and Engels: A Conceptual Concordance*** (Oxford: Basil Reference 1983), pp. 87-88.
60. Karl **Marx**, ***Theories of Surplus Value*** (translated by **Emile** Burns, 3 volumes) (Moscow: Progress 1963-1971), 3, pp. 266-267, quoted in David Montgomery, ***The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987), p. 45, a text that successfully addresses the two-sidedness of **skill**. Note the discussions in Mike Holbrook-Jones, ***Supremacy and Subordination of Labour: The Hierarchy of Work in the Early Labour Movement*** (London: Heinemann 1982); Craig Heron, ***Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada, 1883-1935*** (Toronto: **McClelland** and Stewart 1988); and Jane Gaskell, 'Conceptions of Skill and Work: Some Historical and Political Issues,' in Roberta Hamilton and Michtie Barrett, ***The Politics of Diversity: Marxism, Feminism, and Nationalism*** (London: Verso 1986), pp. 361-380.
61. It is typical of histories of this sort to substitute terms of supposed complexity for terms of supposed simplicity. Thus Riley's **woman/fluctuating** identity duality is paralleled by William Reddy's insistence **that** in the place of class we need to appreciate a language and terminology whose meaning 'draws the mind up short. . . begins to fade. . . no one can use. . . without repeatedly rethinking what it refers to.' Thus for class Reddy substitutes 'monetary exchange symmetry.' See Reddy, ***Money and Liberty in Modern Europe***, pp. 202-203; Denise Riley, ***'Am I That Name': Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*** (London: **Macmillan**, 1988), pp. 1-5.
See Joan Wallach Scott, ***The Glassworkers of Carmaux: French Craftsmen and***

- Political Action in a Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), esp. p. ix. For a particularly dogmatic polemic see Scott's review of Peter N. Stearns, *Lives of Labor* (1975) in *American Historical Review*, 81 (June 1976), p. 565, where Scott refers to 'E. P. Thompson's compelling and sensitive exploration of working-class experience.' Note, as well, 'Interview with Joan Scott,' *Radical History Review*, 45 (Fall 1989), pp. 40-59; Eric Hobsbawm and Joan W. Scott, 'Political Shoemakers,' (original *Past & Present*), in Hobsbawm, *Workers: Worlds of Labour* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 103-130.
63. Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). A full-scale critique of this collection of essays appears in my *Descent into Discourse*, pp. 78-86, and 172-186. Readers interested in more detail are directed there. Other assessments include Lisa Duggan, 'Viva la difference: Joan Scott's Historical Imperatives,' *Voice Literary Supplement* (January-February 1989), p. 37; Claudia Koontz, 'Post Scripts,' *The Women's Review of Books*, 6 (January 1989), pp. 19-20. Lynn Hunt provides the dust-jacket promotional blurb adorning Scott's *Gender and the Politics of History*. Her concluding sentence reads: 'Our reading of Marx and our understanding of class differentiation will never again be the same.'
64. This paragraph draws on *Gender and the Politics of History*, pp. 36-37, 207; 'Interview with Scott,' p. 51. Regarding Juliet Mitchell, Scott did not have access to Mitchell's 'Reflections on Twenty Years of Feminism,' in Juliet Mitchell and AM Oakley, ed., *What is Feminism?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 34-49, but took Mitchell's position from a set of seminars at Princeton. Note Angela McRobbie, 'An Interview with Juliet Mitchell,' *New Left Review*, 170 (July-August 1988), pp. 80-92.
65. Scott appears to be a particular case of a general phenomenon identified by Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration*, p. xv: 'For the reception of Denida's work, perhaps more than that of any other recent French thinker has been marked by an astonishingly casual and unquestioning acceptance of certain extremely condensed - not to say sloganistic - characterizations of the history of Western thought, as if this history could be dismissed through its reduction to a set of perfunctory dualisms.'
66. Lisa Duggan, 'Scott's Historical Imperatives,' p. 37; 'Interview with Scott,' p. 50; Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International, 1947), p. 39.
67. Note Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, p. 176; Koontz, 'Post Scripts,' p. 19. See also Jane Flax, 'Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 12 (1987), pp. 621-643; Deborah Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1985).
68. Swtt, *Gender and the Politics of History*, p. 65. This wording represents a slight change from the original article 'On Language, Gender, and Working Class History,' *International Labor and Working Class History*, 31 (Spring 1987), p. 11, where Swtt says more bluntly that the working class family was established by the Chartist programme and its conception of class and that no radical economic theories were later able to entirely displace this construction. I take these changes to be improvements, but of a cosmetic sort.
69. Note, as well, Angela Weir and Elizabeth Wilson, 'The British Women's Movement,' *New Left Review*, 148 (November-December 1984), pp. 82-85.
70. Barbara Foley, 'The Politics of Deconstruction,' in Robert Con and Ronald Schleifer, ed., *Rhetoric and Form: Deconstruction at Yale* (Norman Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), p. 115; Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, pp. 5, 2. Circular conceptions of power and causality permeate Scott's new approach. See, as well, 'Interview with Joan Scott,' pp. 47-48, where Scott

argues that gender is a meaning system that constructs **difference** and that **political economy** constructs, rather than reflects, sexual difference.

71. Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976), p. 109.
72. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party,' in *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress, 1968), p. 38.