

Introduction: Decency and Debasement

The first gods measured out memory with a *jicara* in order to share it out, and all the men and women came by to receive their measure of memory. But some of the men and women were larger than the others and then the measure of memory was not seen equally in all. It shone clearly in the smallest and in the largest it was made opaque. Because of that they say that memory is greatest and strongest in the smallest and it is harder to find in the powerful. That is why they also say that men and women become smaller and smaller when they grow old. They say it is so memory will shine more brightly. They say it is the work of the oldest of the old: to make memory great.

And they also say that dignity is no more than memory which lives. They say.
— Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, e-mail communiqué of 25 August 1998
(translator unknown)

■ A *jicara* is a small bowl made from a gourd. I had to look it up in a Spanish dictionary, and that's what it said. The term may have all sorts of meaningful cultural resonances, but I have no idea what they might be. But you don't have to know what a *jicara* is to get Marcos's point about the asymmetrical relation of memory to the powerful. For history's winners, prevailing social arrangements are themselves a daily testimony to their special self-worth, while the bloodier truths of how they arrived at their privileged position exist as a threat to the good conscience their sense of decency desires. There are so many things that the powerful need to forget. But for those who exist in a world rigged to debase them, the subjective value of dignity needs the ob-

jective affirmation of a “memory which lives.” The act of remembering is itself a valorization process, and a living memory is a current of spiritual power whose source is beyond the reach of the powers that be. But even memory needs its materialities, if only a small bowl and a site where the living can gather to announce that the dead are also present—ancestors, friends, whomever we care about enough to identify their struggles with ours—our dead. The dead still live as long as there are jicara bowls, little pots to pass out their memory as our dignity, our life as their life. Religious traditions, at their best, are very good at fashioning such tools of solidarity. Marxism has been less successful at this form of production. This seems to me less the result of inherent theoretical shortcomings than of historical circumstances. The cult of the great leader and memorials to martyrs of the revolution—this has always been the religious apparatus of the new princes. It is harder to invent new forms of communal solidarity. In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela recalls a gesture of secular communion made by Nat Bregman, his “first white friend”:

One day, at lunchtime, we were sitting in the office [where both worked] and Nat took out a packet of sandwiches. He removed one sandwich and said, “Nelson, take hold of the other side of the sandwich.” I was not sure why he asked me to do this, but as I was hungry, I decided to oblige. “Now pull,” he said. I did so and the sandwich split roughly in two. “Now, eat,” he said. As I was chewing, Nat said, “Nelson, what we have just done symbolizes the philosophy of the Communist Party; to share everything we have.” He told me he was a member of the party and explained the rudiments of what the party stood for. . . . I heard him out, asked questions, but did not join. I was not inclined to join any political organization, and the advice of [his white employer] Mr. Sidelsky [against emulating the radical politics of a fellow African employee, Gaur Radebe] was still ringing in my ears. I was also quite religious, and the party’s antipathy to religion put me off. But I appreciated half that sandwich.¹

The real point of the anecdote, and of Mandela’s decision not to join the Communist Party, has to do with leadership. That his friend Gaur Radebe had opted against getting a college degree and in favor of joining the Communist Party taught Mandela “that a degree was not in itself a guarantee of leadership and that it meant nothing unless one went out into the community to prove oneself.”² But Mandela decides that Bregman’s communist reevaluation of the sacramental breaking

of bread is not powerful enough to justify abandoning the religious traditions that are so meaningful to him and so integral to the community he seeks to lead. The attempt at a communist transubstantiation fails: It's just a sandwich. Cultural revolutions are not so easily accomplished.

A lesson is here for those of us seeking to realize a vision—democracy or, to give its materialist name, communism—that would be truer and more profound than religion. We might recall that this is not a new problem, nor is the turn of thought that arises when one is forced to confront its full difficulty. At a time when no educated intellectual could believe in religious superstitions about the continuing life of the dead, when, indeed, the emerging episteme seemed to demand “the annihilation of all past traditional references” (as Claudia Pozzana says of the 1916 China confronted by Li Dazhao, though here I am referring to Rome around 45 B.C.E.), Cicero found his thought forced into a new kind of reflection on cultural materialities. “I have learnt more about the proper way of worshipping the gods,” he writes in *De Natura Deorum*, “from the poor little pots [*capedunculae*, small bowls used in sacrifices, according to my Latin dictionary] bequeathed to us by Numa . . . than from all the theories of the Stoics [the great modernists of his day].”³ As a materialist of the Marxist variety, I want not only to learn from the little pots that cultures make to share out the living memory of a common struggle, I want to learn how to make new ones. New bowls strong enough not to shatter under the barbarism and violence of what the hegemonic discourse, despite the best efforts of Bruno Latour, still calls modernity.⁴

All this is to explain that I come to this collection not as an expert on Asia nor as an academic (I am neither), but as someone obsessed with very particular local struggles (as it happens, in Los Angeles) and specific theoretical issues. I read to learn what struggles and theories concern the authors and to look for clues to a discourse that would highlight the commonality among these diverse struggles. I read to discover a language of common struggle or even just a theory for linking separate local struggles (as “archipelagos of meaning,” to use Marshall Johnson’s concluding phrase) in relations of mutual aid. This is the problem I think about when Claudia Pozzana speaks of a “radical crisis of Marxism.” From, let us say, the founding of the Second International in Paris in 1889 to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, Marxism provided the name for a common struggle, the struggle of those committed to fighting the exploitation of the oppressed. Not

everyone thought Marxism was the right way to do this, but everyone understood that what Marxism, as a name, as a political identity, meant. At the end of the Cold War, even leftists who so hated the bloody betrayals of “actually existing socialism” that they would never have imagined calling themselves Marxists or communists felt great despair when the Soviet Union dissolved. Its brand of state socialism may have been the most obscene betrayal of our own best hopes, but these were our hopes, our illusions. It is strange how much the October Revolution seems to have meant now that it is over. Even for those who did not believe in it, the second world, as it was called, represented a world-historical force whose very existence challenged the power of first world capitalism. It stood for the possibility of a global alternative even as most knew it was not itself that alternative. It is not the loss of the reality but rather the loss of possibility that made the first half of the 1990s (when some of these essays were written) such a time of disillusionment for the left.

It seems to me that this collection might have been called *Twelve Essays in Disillusionment and a Poem of Hope*. Although the essay by Pozzana strikes the keynote for this volume by thematizing a contemporary crisis of Marxism, not all the disillusionment recorded in these essays derives from the failings of Marxism. Most do, if only because half the essays concern the People’s Republic of China. Sanjay Seth’s examination of the Naxalite movement in India is certainly about Marxism’s shortcomings, as is Sugiyama Mitsunobu’s study of Japanese schools of Marxist economics. But, the essays by Youme Park and Gi-Wook Shin on South Korea discuss disillusionment with the commitment to democracy of Marxism’s great nemesis, the United States. The corrosive analysis by Marshall Johnson of nationalist historical preservation practices for constructing “China” in Taiwan has nothing to do with lost Marxist illusions. And D. R. Howland’s reconstruction of Luo Sen concerns an encounter that occurred decades before Marxism meant anything in Asia. It is less the subject matter of the essays than the time of their composition, along with the methodologies they employ, that makes it possible to say that this collection as a whole is about Marxism.

The thoughts provoked during my own reading of this volume returned time and again to the problem of subjectivity and its Marxist theorization. This may simply be a result of the particular interests I bring to this collection. The Marxist theory of subjectivity is the primary topic for only three of these essays—those by Jing Wang, Dai Jinhua, and Liu Kang—and even these focus on the diverse issues

of voluntarism, consumerism, and aesthetics. But insofar as I have a coherent response to offer, it must take the form of a discussion of this problem, tracking a materialist theory of subjectivity through certain conceptions of historical singularity, social identity, and economic modernity that appear in these texts.

Singularity is, of course, the fundamental category for any critical historical consciousness. Any historian insists that each event and situation must be understood in its uniqueness. Moreover, to focus on historical singularities is to foreground the category of subjectivity: to understand “what happened” means understanding what it meant to those to whom it happened at the time. Because the interpretation of a past event such as the Cultural Revolution is itself a significant factor in the politics of the present, the historian must overcome the “virus of the present,” as Alessandro Russo puts it, by reflecting “on each political situation as singular and endowed with its own proper mode of political thinking.” There is nothing in this historical conception of singularity peculiar to a materialist theory of subjectivity. Surely what distinguishes a historical materialist approach to subjectivity is an emphasis on the formative influence of those material objects and class antagonisms that are decisive in a particular mode of production. The question has always been how to develop such an approach without letting its analysis of economic structures and the social identities they construct erase the complex singularity of concrete events (their contingency) and the autonomous subjectivity of historical actors (“voluntarism”). Among the texts in this collection, this theoretical problem is most directly addressed by Howland and Pozzana.

In his essay, Howland seeks to reconstruct the subjectivity (or “absent biography”) of “Perry’s Chinaman,” Luo Sen, whose position in the Japanese-American negotiations of 1853–54 had been occluded in the authoritative American (and, presumably, Japanese) accounts of the event. He characterizes his method for doing this by citing Adorno’s precept to “abide insistently in the particulars” and Benjamin’s idea of “construction from particulars.” Such a method seeks to break through Benjamin’s “reified continuity” imposed on history by “the ideology of progress” (or, as other authors in this volume might prefer to put it, the ideology of modernization). When Howland states that “the steamship defined the epoch,” he is making a familiar sort of historical materialist assertion. What is distinctive is his conception of how this defining process occurs. As the most publicly visible power object functioning within a technologically inte-

grated developmental bloc consisting of coal- and iron-produced machinery, the steamship (along with the locomotive) was certainly the great icon of industrial modernity from the 1830s to the 1910s (when petroleum energy and new engines offered up the automobile and electrification). Howland adopts Benjamin's notion of the "dialectical image" to examine how such objects of economic production become objects of cultural production as well. When new technology becomes established as the infrastructure of a given social world, the authority inherent in its functional importance is expressed in the material presence of its most characteristic objects. A new realism forms in recognition that these particular objects (and the larger system they represent) must be the instruments by which our dreams and desires may be fulfilled. An entire social imaginary congeals within the passive materiality of these inert things. Their very particularity is experienced as the material index of the invisible historical dynamism driving a society as a whole toward a destined future. (As Heidegger put it in his essays on the history of ontology, their presence stands as the revelation of a new "destining.")

This dynamism may be articulated back into the language of traditional culture. Samuel Wells Williams, the American missionary Howland discusses, was typical of nineteenth-century Protestant Americans who viewed the modern industry that made the nation a rising economic and military power in the world as the earthly instrument of "God's plan." This was the accepted formulation for Christian Americans wishing to reconcile the realism of their reason with the vision of their faith. Such an ideological formation can be (and often has been) studied according to the methods of intellectual history: One can discover the key figures who forged the new discourse, trace the routes of its dissemination, and appreciate its functional significance for the society of its time. The materialist cultural criticism developed in "Western Marxism," whether Benjamin's approach to cultural artifacts as dialectical images or Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology, differs from such intellectual history. It views ideologies as specific forms of rationality and imagination that have been generalized out of particular historical experiences; its primary concern is to analyze the concrete linkages mediating such totalizing reconciliations of rational argument and collective fantasy by a method of theorization from things in their particularity. Such a materialist analysis entails a kind of self-reflexive interrogation that violates modern academic standards for achieving objectivity and therefore truth. In my view, the real offense consists not in any refusal to be held accountable

to the truths that historical scholarship can establish (any discipline capable of proving that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery is well worth adhering to). In his essay, Howland clearly holds his argument accountable to what few truths conventional history can establish about Luo Sen. It is rather the added dimension that Liu Kang in his essay calls “the inscription of self-reflexivity” that is the real offense: The unrepressed subjectivity of the self-reflexive historian supposedly pollutes the analysis, transforming history into a literary fiction that is incapable of objective truth.

What is really at stake is the taboo that keeps official history separate from living memory, because the latter is politically dangerous. Yet to comprehend the nineteenth-century ideology of progress—to see how its vision of modernization as a manifest destiny functioned as a secular religion—one must discern its embeddedness in lived particularities by means of what modern historians would dismiss as literary imagination. To experience the trembling iron of a steamship or a locomotive as it mastered time and space with unprecedented power, to experience a Maxim gun or a Krupp cannon firing its burst of sovereignty over human life, was to feel the incarnate force of historical destiny at work in one’s hands, even if only fascist poets like Marinetti ever dared celebrate it in words. Given the very different materialities embodying the distinctive economic logic and military culture of Tokugawa Japan, how could such a sensibility not appear to represent barbarism rather than civilization?

By examining the American-Japanese negotiations that culminated in the Treaty of Kanagawa, Howland focuses on a moment of cross-cultural encounter between societies with incommensurable modes for valuing material objects as embodiments of divine power (“divine” in the sense of divination, future determining). Such encounters are particularly revealing for materialist cultural studies. When the Americans make gifts to the emperor of such things as miniature railways, a telegraph, a telescope, and guns, while the Japanese give such items as “a gold lacquered writing table,” Howland is surely right that these are not just displays of national commodities that might become exports in international exchange. They are assertions of cultural identity by means of particular material objects embodying the values informing either culture. For Howland, the incommensurability of Japanese and American modes of valuation finds no resolution; the treaty is simply a recognition of the superior military power of the Americans. Nor is he interested in what would interest me: the functional importance of the American objection to the debasing treatment of visiting Ameri-

can sailors as the basis for establishing alien rights in Japan. Rather, he finds a sort of alternative resolution for the whole episode in the gift-giving practice of the forgotten mediator, Luo Sen: his signing of hundreds of fans for his Japanese hosts, a calligraphic gesture that drew on a common tradition of literary spirituality to mark the unrepeatable singularity of each moment of personal encounter, leaving a material trace of a spiritual truth that cannot be “objectified” and is not transferable through any extended system of exchange.

The lesson Howland derives from the reconstructed biography of Luo Sen is that the truth of subjectivity is realized only through an aesthetic apprehension of universality through singularity. As Howland puts it, “Through the course of his successive obsessions with particular, beautiful objects, the individual subject comes to understand the universality of beauty.” This is, to be sure, a kind of materialism, but it is one that finds its truth outside of (or in alienation from) the historical. History—the American steamship, or the aircraft carrier that is its successor—remains. The historical importance of the war system remains. As Pozzana reminds us in her essay on Li Dazhao, Marxism was founded in Asia after World War I in part because, at the time, the October Revolution seemed to represent “the only event running counter to the logic of war.” Although twentieth-century state socialism proved unable to escape the logic of war, the appeal of Marxism to people around the world has been as a revolutionary project that would end not only class exploitation but also the war system that has always been the barbarism of “civilized” states. Given the insistence of You-me Park and Sanjay Seth in this volume that we think about violence, I do not think that a Marxist theorization of singularity in terms of an aesthetics of beauty is what we’re after.

It is interesting to turn from Howland’s Western Marxist reconstruction of Luo Sen’s aesthetic of singularity to the idea of singularity presented in Pozzana’s translation and discussion of Li Dazhao’s “Spring.” If I read him correctly, Li Dazhao does not conceive singularity as the way universal beauty transcends history but rather as the way a particular moment of earthly beauty may be retained as an image of eternity, a living memory that frees one to reenter history as a contemporary. Written at a time of radical disillusionment, according to Pozzana, “Spring” is a poem of breakthrough, of resolution. It accepts all the rising forces of the crisis to achieve a new vision and thereby divine a new path of hope to the future. Li Dazhao’s vision of the eternal renewal of spring thinks history as “the whole of singularity” and in doing so establishes us (or the students whom he ad-

dresses) in a universal time that might be called contemporaneity (or, as Johannes Fabian would say, “coevalness”⁵). This is what most struck me about “Spring”: in it there are only contemporaries. Jin Shengtan theorizes about *Zhou* and *Yi* in the same space-time as Thomson and Tait theorize cosmological physics. Emperor Han Wudi tames barbarians in the same world where Teddy Roosevelt hunts polar bears. Confucius and Byron speak to us on equal terms. All the history that was and all the history that will be is here in a liberating moment of poetic reflection limited only by Li Dazhao’s repertoire of knowledge and imagination. By regarding all of history as itself a singularity, the poem achieves a materialist conception of historical time as itself eternity: eternity as the contemporaneity shared by the living and the dead.

Such a historical consciousness is no less true than those that divide history into discrete periods. There are good reasons to discriminate among societies according to the different economic and cultural logics that organize them. Historical materialism is certainly right to notice the epoch-making importance of new technologies of production, such as the steamship. But grand periodizations of world history, whether according to modes of production or stages of civilization, tend to absolutize the divide between the living and their predecessors of the “premodern” past. Such universal periodizations are consistently used to absolve modernity’s own genocides by conceiving modernization as an objective fate and by mapping periodized history as a developmental hierarchy onto the peoples and societies of the present world. Whole peoples may be regarded “primitives” (“our living ancestors”) or “feudal remnants,” “survivals” whom history itself has judged to belong already among the dead, thereby absolving the “moderns” who proceed to make them dead. While the discourse of modernity condemns genocide as a willful act performed by those who refuse its imperatives and thereby fall back into “ancient ethnic hatreds,” it forgives the objectively inevitable genocide of cultures that would refuse the modern destiny. The project of modernization is thus premised on a sort of reverse sacrificial logic where it is the dead (including the “living relics” of resistant cultures) who must sacrifice their existence for the living. Certainly the implicit premise of contemporary neoliberalism is that the vast majority of people in the past and of the generation alive today must be regarded as waste, as necessary sacrifices if nations are to climb up the ladder of per capita GDP to the point where there bursts forth the flower of a sizable middle class, whose innate (and apparently unique) sense of decency will lead them to demand things like democracy, human rights, and an end to civilization’s

appetite for annihilation. The Pinochets of the world, the Somozas, the Mobutus, the Reza Pahlevis, the Saddam Husseins (until he lost his way), and for that matter the Stalins and Li Pengs of modernization's "socialist alternative," must be regarded, sadly, as indispensable tools for building the material conditions for a just future society. It's a sad fact that, if the modernization lifeboat is to reach the promised land (call it freedom, democracy, communism), most of the people on board have to be chucked over the side. Periodized historical narratives that divide moderns from nonmoderns are spiritual constructions, mirrors hung on the doorway leading into the House of Modernity, to protect the inhabitants from being haunted by the angry ghosts of the nonancestral dead. But periodizations, whether or not they are used to justify the genocidal logic of modernization, are not more true than the historical consciousness that refuses all periodization. When does one moment end and another begin? It is just as true to regard the whole of human history as occurring in a single moment, and therefore to regard everyone, living and dead, as contemporaries.

Li Dazhao makes this historical consciousness real in his poem. It does what Johnson, at the end of his essay, calls on cultural critics to do: "to transpose undoing the dualities of objective and subjective, of space and time, into a solidarity with those who are . . . contemporary but distant in space and those who are distant in time." The poem represents one of those new *jicaras* that Marxism must learn to fashion. Li Dazhao offers us a materialist eternity. To touch the earth, as Gautama did, is to touch the sacred relic connecting us to the whole of it and to each other. In "Spring" we find Benjamin's Angel of History leaning against the railing of a tower overlooking a springtime garden in a foreign land. The season of spring, the age of youth, is the thing we desire both in the reality of its present existence and in the potency of its possible future. This is not a utopian vision: the time of possibility is an eternally recurring reality in our concrete experience. In his poem, Li Dazhao offers us a singularly real moment from his life as a universal image of our changing earthly existence as itself eternity: the eternal endurance of possibility, of hope, that is one aspect of the temporality of the material world. For him, this is a revelation powerful enough to be the equal of religion: "As for myself, I think that one should believe in the endless Spring of humanity, in the same way that religious people believe in God."

Indeed, the next words of the poem, at least in Pozzana's translation (on which I am wholly dependent), are "more so." The claim that our belief in what the poet calls "the endless Spring of humanity" should

be stronger than the belief of theistic faiths is made in reference to the modern science of biology. Although the “biologists’ warnings” to which Li Dazhao refers are perhaps biological theories of racial degeneration that, one hopes, no longer speak to us, it is still the intellectual revolution of modern biology, specifically the Darwinian retelling of human history, that has disempowered traditional theistic expressions of divinity. I could not disagree more strongly than with the views that Pozzana quotes from Alain Badiou, who apparently prefers “the self-asserting rights of the Immortal” to “human rights” and who locates “Sovereignty” in assertions of “opposition to the will-of-being-an-animal.” Surely Li Dazhao is locating eternity in our experience of the earth and our capacity to retain a living memory of spring, not in the willful denial of the truth that we are mortal animals. If the first gods were invented in rituals that proclaimed an absolute difference between humans and other animals, as some hypothesize,⁶ then modern biology’s subversion of the human-animal distinction is perhaps the true cause of the historical death of the gods of religion. It is still possible to tell the story of human history, and our part in it, in religious language (“God’s plan” or whatever), but people know this is merely an overcoding of the stories modern science tells on the authority of secular materialism. History has changed the ground of belief, as Li Dazhao recognized. Although my Christian friends tell me that the core of their belief consists in the act of praising God, I cannot help thinking that the power of religion has come from their ability to express the truth that the dead live. Perhaps it is just my own peculiar obsession, but I do not believe a Marxist culture can be established until atheists can learn ways of saying how it is literally true that the dead—all of them—still live with us. It is this that I find in Li Dazhao’s vision of history as eternity itself, an ongoing singularity within which, when regarded as a whole, all the living and all the dead live together as contemporaries.

Much as this reading (more likely, misreading) of Li Dazhao’s “Spring” speaks to me, I do not think I could guess from the poem itself that the author would go “out into the community to prove himself,” as Mandela says, by organizing rickshaw drivers and helping found the Chinese Communist Party. Certainly there is a radical vision here whose universal contemporaneity entails a spiritual leveling that implicitly challenges the power of any established hierarchy of differently valued social identities. But one can find as much in any enduring religious tradition that has not been wholly subsumed into a state ideol-

ogy. “Nothing is easier,” we read in the *Communist Manifesto*, “than to give Christian asceticism a Socialist tinge.”⁷ (One is tempted to add that nothing has been easier than to give Marxist socialism an ascetic tinge.) What is specifically Marxist about this vision? What has it to do with the historical materialist theorization of subjectivity in terms of class exploitation? The answer, it seems to me, may be found in the linkage that Marxism discerns between the objective category of exploitation and the subjective category of debasement. As Marx put it in his most famous paragraph on religion (the one with the endlessly misconstrued “opium of the people” line), to be a communist means to accept what Marx ironically calls “the categorical imperative” not only to end economic exploitation but “to overthrow all conditions in which man is a debased, enslaved, neglected, contemptible being.”⁸ The novelty of Marxist materialism is its insistence that debasing structures of domination must be traced through their political and legal institutions to economies of exploitation in which they have a functional significance. This means interpreting the social identities proper to particular hierarchies of rank, status, and political rights in terms of the economic category of class. To say that Marxist materialism interprets history in terms of class struggle means (or should mean) that it analyzes the interdependence (if one prefers, the dialectic) of particular forms of objective exploitation and particular forms of subjective debasement. It develops this interpretation to discover how to establish a just system of objective economic valuation that would affirm the subjective value—the dignity—of the debased. Isn’t that the point?

In any event, it is this materialist problematization of subjectivity that I think of when I read Liu Kang’s call for a “reinscription of ‘self-reflexivity’ as a proper Marxist problematic.” Self-reflexivity for historical materialists is not the self-reflexivity of Descartes or Kant or, for that matter, Nagarjuna—the self-reflexivity of a disembodied consciousness. Hegelianism and the Vajrayana surely come closer to the mark, though not close enough. Ours is the self-consciousness of “a corporeal, living, real, sensuous, objective being,” as Marx once put it, piling on as many materialist qualifiers as he could, whose reality is expressed in and reflected from other “real, sensuous objects.”⁹ Because ours is a materialist consciousness, as Michael Taussig has compellingly argued, otherness, alterity (indeed, “alienation”) is inscribed in human self-reflexivity, imparting to it an inescapably mimetic logic.¹⁰ Our mimetic desire makes us want the value of seeing ourselves reflected back from whatever we are not. Because difference

is the medium of our identity, we intensify the alienness of others to reveal our dignity in their strangeness, be they animal gods, our ancestral dead, or foreigners. So-called primitive religions do this primarily along a temporal axis; their masks and rituals are mimetic technologies that realize the value of the living through the ongoing judgment of those dead who form the substance of one's own identity. Lacking such traditions, moderns use those among the living with whom they do not identify to display their own ethical value to themselves, at the expense of their Others' lives, which is only proper because they are performing the genealogical function of "living ancestors." Civilized states have always tried to subsume the genealogical temporality of kinship "blood relations" by mimetic technologies whose logic of unification may be characterized as fractal analogy. The cosmological architecture of temple states and the sacred regalia of royal monarchies display in material form a proper order that is supposed to be replicated throughout the society. A comparable unification by fractal reflection is achieved in the form of literary culture in the master Confucian analogy of the five social relations. Hegel offered a modern version of this system of representational analogy when he argued that the concept of freedom (the destiny of universal history) is actualized for all citizens in its universal form in the sovereign power of free decision exercised by the head of the state (in his case, the Prussian state). Because Marxism was developed as a democratic critique of all such politics of reflective representation, its political materialism has been a persistent embarrassment for the vanguard party ideology of Leninist states.

Particularly for those of us more familiar with the political aesthetics developed in Western Marxism, Liu Kang's essay clarifies the very different significance that aesthetic theory and the concept of subjectivity has had in socialist states. Specifically, he illuminates the way Maoism conceptualized the representational authority of the Communist Party as "objectivity" and therefore devalued criticism of its policies as mere "subjectivity." The difficulty of criticizing the Leninist model even in post-Mao China was brought home to me in Jing Wang's essay when she expressed doubt that Wang Ruoshui and Hu Qiaomu "were ever aware that the Party question and the subjectivity question make up two sides of the same coin." Given my own inability to grasp the discursive parameters of the debates about socialist alienation and Marxist humanism in 1980s China, what most interested me about the essays by Jing Wang and Liu Kang was their mention of the way these debates were quashed as "spiritual pollution" by linking the ideas

of “the early Marx” to a campaign against pornography. This reinforces my belief that Marxist cultural studies needs to examine historical forms of human degradation not only to understand the ways in which the debased organize their own dignity against the powers that rule them but to learn how cultural discourses about degradation are used as a form of social power. It would be valuable for cultural critics to examine the “concrete particulars” that allowed a highly theoretical argument about socialist alienation to be cut off by equating humanism to pornography as the theory and practice of a debased spirituality that threatened socialist decency.

Decency, “conduct conforming to propriety,” is perhaps the most Confucian word in the English language. Michael Dutton begins his essay by citing the Confucian assertion of a subjective standard of propriety that remains constant throughout the objective history of changing political regimes. The idea of decency is a powerful social fact, however much its particular conception of proper social relations varies from culture to culture. There is nothing more natural for radical cultural politics to debunk than the “decency”—the pretense to moral respectability—of the powerful. But, cultural standards of decency are a political resource available to anyone in a society, not just the powerful. This truth first struck me while reading about the “Mothers of the Plaza” during the dirty war in Argentina: They alone could act publicly during the period of state terror because they were immune to being “disappeared” as a result of the very sexism that, from a larger political perspective, progressives would wish to abolish.¹¹ It seems to me that this example raises a more complex issue than that of having to choose between ideological purity and effective politics. The reasons why many feminists may be more comfortable adopting the mantle of Emma Goldman than of Mother Jones are doubtless complex. I suspect that one of these reasons may be an unreflective condemnation of all traditional forms of decency by those who assume that radical politics must be countercultural. To dismiss the social power of the maternal persona deployed by the Mothers of the Plaza as nothing but a component of oppressive patriarchal systems, rather than as a resource for oppositional politics, might be a sacrifice as unnecessary as it is disempowering.

A similar error is made by those who refuse to acknowledge the progressive potential of religious traditions simply because they are the institutionalized forms of decency of an unjust society. One of the local campaigns that I was recently involved in was an effort by a service workers labor union to organize in a Catholic hospital sys-

tem. Because Catholic social teaching has articulated the value of a just workplace and, indeed, of labor unions, it was crucial to gain support from a group of Catholic priests and other local clergy who support the campaign as a matter of religious conscience. Indeed, the most effective political movement in Los Angeles in recent years has been the Living Wage Coalition, a movement of labor unions, religious groups, and community organizations that has succeeded in passing pro-labor laws by appealing to various communities' general sense of decency that traditionally have no love for labor unions, nor for denunciations of exploitation, but that also know the money cost of a decent life and hold religious beliefs about the right of all to such. Indeed, some organizing campaigns at particular businesses have succeeded only by gaining support among people with whom targeted business owners share common religious values and with whom they socialize as equals. Though having their decency impugned by an employee or a labor union would mean nothing to them, it turns out that the good opinion of their social equals matters a great deal. Living wage campaigns may seem like an insufficiently radical program to would-be revolutionaries, but they articulate a radical truth: Under capitalism money replaces land as the ground of social existence; it is the thing without which people cannot live, decently or otherwise.

Like the democratization movement in South Korea, the living wage movement would change in response to the state's recourse to violence and police repression (which is, in fact, the situation for some communities in other parts of Los Angeles). But to think that there can be no radical politics outside a context of violence would be to fall into the trap of what You-me Park calls "the police interpretation" ("to focus solely on the barbarity of the state and the bloody sign of terror deliberately constructed by the military state," to think of revolutions solely in terms of "graphic bloodshed and scattered glorious moments"). Because states at times crush democratic movements seeking to transform the legal system by means of massacres and campaigns of state terror, this does not mean that laws cannot sometimes be radically changed by nonviolent methods asserting the moral authority of an established social ethic.

My point is that the revolutionary project of instituting a material economy that would revalue social identities so that no one's dignity depends on another's debasement should not blind one to the power represented by existing cultural systems of decency. They are often premised on the very values and sense of justice that Marxism is trying to make real. Nor should Marxist scholars ignore the systemic

function of organized debasement outside the workplace and, indeed, outside what capitalism misrepresents as the economy proper. Few academic writers study how societies systematically organize debasement to construct the belief of the powerful in their own decency. Yet the routine moral condemnation and indeed the criminalization of groups that are integral functional parts of the economic system—“illegal” migrant workers, for instance—is a political necessity for regimes to claim legitimacy. Fortunately, some cultural historians have begun to study the social and economic function of debasement.¹² There are both legitimized police powers and disavowed personal pleasures that the decent derive from the debased. Class analysis must learn to examine these systems if it is to understand the mode of subjective valuation that endows the political regime of a given social formation with its ethical power. Surely there are enough ethnographic and sociological studies of diverse cultures to make the assertion that any society has a certain infrastructure of debasement (witchcraft institutions, a criminal underworld). Both the moral economy and the institutionalized power of the privileged depends on such an infrastructure. Routine forms of debasement are essential components in political economies. Their vital importance may be gauged by the intensity of reaction against movements that threaten to remove their stigmatization. Attributing dignity to homosexuals, regarding prostitution as “sex work,” suggesting that drugs be regulated rather than criminalized—such proposals can threaten the stability of an entire social economy.

If there is a subjective component to class analysis, it must consist of examining the social function of systems of decency and debasement that form the moral economy required for a given structure of economic exploitation to operate. This is one way to approach the problem of social policing that Dutton discusses. Indeed, I think that such an approach can use the traditional Marxist history of modes of production, as long as one remembers that the social relations of earlier modes are not abandoned but rather subsumed into the new social formation and thus transformed, not as “relics” but as integral functional components. One may posit an original sexual division of social labor, but the patriarchal ideology that values the work of “economic” production over the work of biological reproduction is still very much with us, as are generalized metaphors of heterosexual union as the moral ground of social unity. If the social division of town and country first ideologized the moral superiority of “intellectual work” over

manual labor, this too is still with us as a resource for ideologues of the computer revolution and a global economy based on intellectual property rights. History, as Dutton says, is very much a matter of “repetitions with difference.”

A class analysis of historical social identities must also learn to avoid distorting people’s real subjectivity—their actual ideals and concrete desires. Marxism’s adherence to the ideology of modernity has been a prime cause of such misrepresentations. This is the point that I take from Seth’s extraordinary essay on the “revolutionary excess” of the Naxalite movement as “an instance of ‘unforgetting’ . . . where Marxist categories came to be penetrated and shaped by the categories informing peasant insurgency.” Beginning as a Marxist-led peasant revolt, the movement developed into a series of violent gestures for “turning the world upside down.” Its spectacular killings staged a radical reevaluation of the traditional hierarchy of landlord and peasant. In doing so, Seth argues, it posed a fundamental question for Marxism and in particular Maoism, whose “schema of revolution in an agrarian society entailed the ‘forgetting’ or misreading of aspects of peasant experience and consciousness.” Because Marxism, just as much as liberal capitalism, has viewed modernization as the path of its own destiny, Maoist revolutionaries had to “forget” the subjectivity of the peasants themselves. As Seth puts it, “a subjectivity or consciousness has been attributed to the peasant that is not, and could not be his own.” In misrepresenting “the peasantry as a class which dreams of a transparent, secular society rendered subject to human control,” Marxists blinded themselves to the indigenous categories of peasant mobilization: localism, territoriality, religiosity.

Moreover, the peasantry is the class that has endured exploitation throughout world history. All “premodern” civilizations were built on extraction of the agrarian surplus they produced. This is also how Marxist states such as the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China have modernized themselves, since the Cold War cut off foreign finance capital as a source of investment. Peasants do not mobilize by suddenly achieving a consciousness that they are the victims of “man-made exploitation,” the radical consciousness that can mobilize an urban proletariat. They know perfectly well they are and have always been exploited by the class whose power rests less on property ownership than on organized violence. Peasants do not mobilize against exploitation. They mobilize against annihilation. Seth notes the radicalizing effect of Indira Gandhi’s forced sterilization campaign in 1975. In Mexico, the Zapatista revolt arose in response to President

Salinas's abolition of the *ejido* land system in favor of a free market in land ownership in 1992; established under the Agrarian Law of 1915, *ejidos* were communally owned lands granted to villages as reparations for past injustices.¹³ The abolition of the *ejido* system, enacted in anticipation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Canada, broke Mexico's fundamental social contract with the peasantry. This was an assault on the material base of the Chiapan peasants' very existence.¹⁴ Certainly annihilation can mobilize anyone: the radicalization of South Korean politics discussed by You-me Park and Gi-Wook Shin was forged in the living memory of the Kwangju massacre. But peasants have different resources: possession of land on which they can subsist autonomously and, if lucky, mountains or swamps to which they can escape. What is most often called the struggle of indigenous peoples are the struggles of those for whom freedom—autonomy—takes the form of land. If urban radicals are to achieve solidarity with those engaged in indigenous struggles, the difference in both subjectivity and material goals must be theorized and respected. This difference has nowhere been more emphatically expressed than in the decision of the Lakota Nation in South Dakota a few years ago to reject a huge monetary settlement they had won from the U.S. Supreme Court as compensation for the theft of the Black Hills. It was the land they wanted, not its money value.¹⁵

Unlike those for whom agrarian autonomy is a viable option and those whose spiritual culture takes a territorial form, exploited groups that cannot survive outside the wage and money system must seek to reshape the system of monetized obligations and legal rights of the state under whose rule they live. It is true that discrete ethnic minorities within a capitalist society have the option of identifying themselves as a people unto themselves with an inherent right to national self-determination as a territorial state. But economic globalization, as well as the history of apartheid in South Africa and of Indian nations in the United States, indicates how problematic are most contemporary movements for territorial autonomy. Indeed, it is part of the vitality of the Zapatista movement that it understands that its demands for the local agrarian autonomy of Mayan peoples can only be won by using its struggle to support a more broad-based effort to transform the Mexican state—a strategy that may have been vindicated with the 2000 election of President Vicente Fox and his signing of the San Andreas Accords recognizing the legitimate land claims of indigenous peoples in Mexico.

For most proletarianized groups, a territorial independence movement is not an option. The only alternative is to form civil and political movements that seek to remedy the violence and exploitation they suffer by restructuring power relations within the existing state. If the history of the twentieth century has taught Marxists nothing else, it has demonstrated that the Leninist model for doing this—the direct seizure of the state by a revolutionary party purporting to exercise the dictatorship of the proletariat—is a failed experiment. If we accept Russo’s analysis of the Cultural Revolution, Maoist China was no more immune than any other state to the political dialectic that gives history the character of struggle. A crisis of authority within the central state leaves local spaces outside its control; there, a multiplicity of autonomous groups organize themselves into diverse factions that ultimately coalesce into two antagonist alliances contesting for state power. The model of the one-party state has proved no more able to escape this dynamic than has the model of a state with no parties (the model on which the United States was founded). Russo argues that the ultimate confrontation between “Scarlet guards” and Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution expressed “a subjective breakdown internal to the working class” that could only happen in a Leninist state in which the political authority of public officials was legitimized in terms of the social identity “working class.” However, in Russo’s view, this was merely the second world form of a global “crisis of the category *political party*” that has culminated in a post–Cold War politics of movements in “civil society” that refuse the traditional political aspiration of becoming the ruling party of a state.

Personally, I do not agree with the claim that political parties no longer matter. But even were this so, does the rejection of the idea of a unified party of the working class mean that class analysis is irrelevant in “the new politics” of civil society, local movements, and nongovernmental organizations? Has history moved us beyond “the political category of class” in the sense that we should abandon the effort of class analysis to understand subjective identities by locating their social ground in economic systems and their historical dynamism in the structural antagonism created by systemic exploitation? Obviously, I myself do not think so. Rather, I think there is need for a better class analysis, one that more truly takes into account the contribution of cultural studies by grasping the particular interrelations among institutional forms of objectified value and subjective experiences of personal value—of dignity and debasement—as these are lived and

remembered within historical structures of power that, more often than not, have been established through successful crimes against humanity.

NOTES

- 1 Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994), 74.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 327.
- 4 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 2nd *Petite réflexion sur le culte moderne des dieux faitiches* (Le Plessis-Robinson: Synthélabo Groupe, 1996).
- 5 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).
- 6 Chris Knight, *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991).
- 7 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: International, 1948), 33.
- 8 Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"*, trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 137.
- 9 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, ed. Quintin Hoare (New York: Random House, 1975), 390.
- 10 Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- 11 John Simpson and Jana Bennett, *The Disappeared and the Mothers of the Plaza: The Story of the 11,000 Argentinians Who Vanished* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985).
- 12 See, for example, Gail Hershatter's multilayered analysis of the social uses of publications in China that decry the scandal of prostitution in *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 393.
- 13 Enrique Krauze, *Mexico: Biography of Power*, trans. Hank Heifetz (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 352.
- 14 George A. Collier, *Basta! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas* (Oakland, Calif.: Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1994).
- 15 Edward Lazarus, *Black Hills, White Justice: The Sioux Nation versus the United States, 1775 to the Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).