

# Feminism

Livia Tenzer

When I was working at the Feminist Press and decided to move to the job of managing editor of *Social Text*, some of my women friends were skeptical. With eyebrows raised, one of them asked, “You’re going to that boys’ club?” Although working at women’s presses had not always been a utopian experience for me, I suddenly doubted the wisdom of my planned departure from a world of purely feminist labor to a more broadly construed left project. In particular, the raised eyebrows made me wonder if the group I had taken to be a diverse gathering of progressive academics—the *Social Text* collective—was in fact an old-style left organization, dominated by “rebel” male egos.

My understandable if cliché doubts bespeak the fraught relationship of feminism with broader progressive movements and, so to speak, with itself (what is it to be purely feminist?). In *ST* 9/10 (1984) Ellen Willis details the intense debate within feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s about whether the movement belonged within larger socialist/left political work or should be separate. This was a debate about whether capitalism is the source of women’s oppression or, as Willis and other radical feminists thought, “male supremacy was itself a systematic form of domination.” It was also a debate about how to relate to established political movements, and whether “the male-dominated left would inevitably resist understanding or opposing male power.” In describing the work of separatists in the 1970s, Willis reminds us, reading today, of the far-reaching cultural impact feminist groups had, speaking for themselves on their own terms, broadcasting their theories in small publications such as *Feminist Revolution* and *Meeting Ground* (two Willis cites) while a host of women’s presses and feminist studies journals sprang into being.

Given the wealth of feminist publishing happening outside of *Social Text* at the time of its origin, it’s not surprising that the journal might be

viewed by some as a “boy’s club.” Its mission as set out in the “Prospectus” in *ST 1* (1979) does not take notice of the burning issues feminists were discussing. Was the triumvirate of founding editors too focused on Marxist high theory to consider gender alongside economic class as an important mode of social organization and oppression, or had they simply decided to leave feminism to the feminist journals? Either way, they did not engage feminist ideas, and (to use an old feminist measure) among the many thinkers they cite as important inspirations for the work of the journal only one woman appears: Rosa Luxemburg.

The story that plays out over the thirty years of the journal’s history, however, suggests that the “Prospectus” contained the seeds of its own feminist undoing. The founders demarcated fields of focus for the journal that could hardly be explored without attention to gender, sexuality, and the historical experiences of women. They were interested in “everyday life,” “mass culture,” and “consumer society”; they promised a journal focused on culture and ideological practices and the new theories that addressed them. Equally important, the journal was from the start a collective whose membership included people invested in feminism, to gauge from the work they contributed to or accepted for publication in *Social Text*’s pages. Reading the early issues of the journal is like watching green shoots emerge at the edges of a parched lawn.

To be sure, it is in the realm of cultural analysis, not revolutionary praxis, that feminist work first appears in *Social Text*, and often buried at the back of the book in “Unequal Developments,” the section that offered reviews and experimental writing. *ST 2* (1979), for example, features John Mowitz’s look at Disney television and its socialization of suburban children as a phenomenon of late consumer capitalism. Focusing on *The Mickey Mouse Club*, he treats the “kids” who appeared on the show, and those who watched it, as homogenous, missing an opportunity to question whether girls and boys experienced the Magic Kingdom in the same way. As if to balance the inattention to gender in Mowitz’s work, in “Unequal Developments” Christine Holmlund performs a thorough feminist dissection of the then-current Disney film *The North Avenue Irregulars*, showing how this comedy about a group of church ladies who take on the local mafia superficially celebrates but finally deflates the idea of women’s activism, and along the way reinforces gendered roles at every level of social life. It may be worth noting that Holmlund and Mowitz were both members of the *Social Text* collective in Madison—the dialogue between their papers must reflect dialogue within the collective.

Again in *ST 3* (1980), “Unequal Developments” provides a key feminist contribution—Susan Willis’s discussion of *The Dollmaker*, the 1954 realist novel by Harriette Arnow—and a necessary complement to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s article in the same issue, which takes pains to generate feminist readings of Dante and Yeats. The foregrounding of Spivak’s

work is in tune with *Social Text's* emphasis on theory and marks an important moment for feminist critique of the canon, deflecting the tendency of some to misuse theory (especially deconstruction) to absolve literary texts of misogyny and generally depoliticize them. But Willis's work offers the excitement of this era's feminist discovery of women writers and transports us into women's historical struggles in the shift from preindustrial to industrial capitalism. The loss of autonomy and selfhood experienced by Arnow's "hillbilly" protagonist, Gertie, when her family moves to Detroit for wartime factory work and she is no longer matriarch of the farm and the provider of bounty on the table but "plummet[s] into commodity culture," reveals intersections of capitalism and patriarchy, macroeconomy and family microeconomy, that *Social Text* needed to pursue.

With Julianne Burton's analysis of the film *Portrait of Teresa* in *ST 4* (1981), cultural analysis moves closer to politics, and the journal begins to examine the contradictions faced by contemporary (Cuban) women negotiating new relationships to sexuality and work. This break with the focus on the literary, the past, and U.S. mass culture sets the stage for the landmark article by Ellen Willis in *ST 6* (1982), which finally plants *Social Text* directly in the heat and ferment of the feminist movement. In "Toward a Feminist Sexual Revolution" Willis argues for sexual freedom as a core feminist value and vehemently against what she labels neo-Victorian and pro-family feminism, bent on shielding women from aggressive male sexuality and confirming motherhood as woman's essential role. Drawing on the revelations of women's consciousness-raising groups, she finds not only that sexual double standards still oppress women (despite the liberating experiments of the 1960s), but also that they are impossible to detach from sexism overall and its foundations in family and economy. In linking sexual liberation to the full project of anticapitalism, Willis and Alice Echols, writing in *ST 7* (1983), established a *Social Text* line on feminism, traceable throughout later issues of the journal, that held sexuality and gender to be constructed, insisted that the basis of patriarchal formations is material, and positioned itself against antipornography and "family values" claims. Privileging neither feminism nor the broader Left, but making them codependent, they closed off the possibility of separatism as a viable feminist strategy (as Willis also does in *ST 9/10*). However, they left open, and very problematic, the question of how to achieve feminist goals in tandem with a broad progressive praxis.

A major obstacle to envisioning radical change for women was the reliance on psychoanalysis to explain sexuality. To read the second half of Willis's "Sexual Revolution" is to take a cold bath in an all-too-familiar account of the nuclear family as destiny, and of childhood within it as leading inexorably to traditionally gendered subject formation. Rachel Bowlby, in her article in *ST 7* on Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Michèle Montrelay, detects a similar problem in these thinkers' accounts of biology as

a basis of subjectivity. But the new attention that *Social Text* was paying to feminist theory and philosophy in the 1980s eventually provided alternatives to psychoanalytic notions of identity and affirmed feminism's connection to the critique of capitalism—especially its manifestation as empire. First, in *ST* 17 (1987) the journal paid homage to Simone de Beauvoir, who had died the year before. In her article on *The Second Sex*, Sonia Kruks emphasizes de Beauvoir's understanding of oppression as occluding the existentialist project to freely make oneself. Diverging from Sartre, as Kruks shows, de Beauvoir argues that a subject's "situation" is always mediated by others, that freedoms are interdependent and, for women, delimited by social institutions established by men. In a telling analogy cited by Kruks, de Beauvoir likens man's relationship to woman as his "Other" to a colonial administrator's relationship to his "native" subjects, marking both power relations as distinctly historical and cultural. Second, encounters with postmodernism reframed feminism in the context of postcolonial thought and a global setting. In *ST* 21 (1989), for example, echoing de Beauvoir, Laura Kipnis moves toward seeing women as a colony and feminism as a decolonizing movement. More helpful than psychoanalysis in explaining consent with oppression, she points out, is third world feminism and its clarity about the cultural, as opposed to natural, differences between the empowered and disempowered.

The scope of feminist work in *Social Text* expands in the aftermath of the postmodern, postcolonial moment to take in women's lives in Eastern Europe (*ST* 27, 1990), Filipinas in transnational space (Roland B. Torentino in *ST* 48, 1996), gender and South African apartheid (Sarah Nuttall in *ST* 78, 2004, and Leola A. Johnson in *ST* 82, 2005), and Indian "untouchable" women and development politics (Sarah Pinto, *ST* 86, 2006), to name just a few of the internationally focused articles from the 1990s and 2000s. Other articles paid new attention to women in U.S. economic and racial subclasses (for example, Julie Bettie on *Roseanne* and working-class women and Joan Morgan on hip-hop and urban black poor women in *ST* 45, 1995). In addition, the journal published two special issues looking at gender, sexuality, and work: *ST* 37 (1993) on sex workers and sex work, edited by Anne McClintock; and *ST* 61 (1999), "Lesbians, Gays, and the Struggle for Workplace Rights," edited by Kitty Krupat and Patrick McCreery.

There is, no doubt, a risk for feminism of falling into gendered Orientalism, racism, or classism when it abandons autocritique for cross-cultural critique. Dohra Ahmad, writing in *ST* 99 (2009) on popular American views of Muslim women, quotes Leti Volpp on this problem: "The discourse of feminism versus multiculturalism assumes that women in minority communities require liberation into the 'progressive' social customs of the West." But especially now, when some in the West might like to think we've moved beyond sexism, analysis of everyday life is essential for revealing what is really happening to patriarchy/capitalism under globalization and how liberatory possibilities for women often get foreclosed (to apply a

term much in use right now). The reality of family life, in particular, has changed much faster than the ideology of the family. Where Judith Butler could argue in *ST* 52/53 (1997) that capitalism requires the heteronormative family in order to reproduce itself, the desideratum of capitalism today is workers without family—transnational migrants whose reproduction always occurs elsewhere, or homegrown workers whose families are rendered invisible by the pressures of the labor market.

Women have largely been absorbed into this market, making social adaptations such as long-distance motherhood and women as breadwinners commonplace across the economic spectrum. Yet wages have not translated into independence for women, especially where family microeconomies trap them between inexorable demands and repositilities. Meanwhile, the family, however fragmented, remains a primary site for the inculcation of gender norms, a place where children in developed and developing countries consume mass culture mythologies such as the Disney princess, now available in multiple languages across multimedia channels. No princess in these popular tales, however “brave,” goes to work, and every princess needs and gets a prince. The same technologies that deliver Disney offer adults new modes of personal interface with transnational finance and security. But these technologies interrupt users’ supposedly self-determining activities with specters of gender as destiny: Miss California, a Swat Valley beating, Susan Boyle (each a complex story, but all reminders in spring 2009 of women’s continuing subordination to harsh regimes of beauty, religious and cultural restrictions, and economic exclusion).<sup>1</sup> At this moment of retrospect for *Social Text*, it’s clearly time to revisit the discards of our feminisms gone by, like Silvia Federici’s call for pay for housework (*ST* 9/10, 1984), Joan Morgan’s reading of misogyny as a “mask that hides and expresses pain,” and Ellen Willis’s fear that the unconscious is holding us back.

Oh, and by the way, the collective *is* a diverse group of progressives, in various stages of reconstruction, who happen to be a delight to work with.

## Note

1. I refer here to three women who, during the writing of this essay, were unavoidable on the Internet and television: Carrie Prejean, Miss California USA 2009, who created controversy with her stance against gay marriage and was dethroned after being exposed as having breast implants and posing for seminude photographs; an anonymous teenage girl in Pakistan’s Taliban-controlled Swat Valley who received a punitive beating for hosting a man in her home; and Susan Boyle, the singer discovered on *Britain’s Got Talent*, whose meteoric rise from obscurity and poverty led to her breakdown. See respectively: Jesse McKinley, “Donald Trump Fires Miss California,” *New York Times*, 10 June 2009, [www.nytimes.com/2009/06/11/us/11pageant.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/11/us/11pageant.html?_r=1); Declan Walsh, “Video of Girl’s Flogging as Taliban Hand out Justice,” *Guardian*, 2 April 2009, [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/apr/02/taliban-pakistan-justice-women-flogging](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/apr/02/taliban-pakistan-justice-women-flogging); “Susan Boyle,” *Wikipedia*, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susan\\_Boyle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susan_Boyle) (accessed 7 August 2009).

Introduction: A History of Social Text (Thomas, Stanley)

The End of Political Economy? (Anders)

- Aronowitz, "Why Work?" 23
- Resnick and Wolff, "Marxist Epistemology" 42

E. Ahmad?  
Society as Text

volunteer?

- Haraway, Teddy Bear Patriarchy 45
- Ross, The Work of Nature 12
- Sayres, Glory-mongering 15

Consider: de Certeau

Must We Burn "Mass" Culture? (Andrew)

- Jameson, Reification and Utopia
- Richard Johnson, What is Culture?
- ~~Mosquera, Bad Taste and Good~~

Post-colonial Discourse (George)

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an's Rhetor

# Film and Mass Culture

Anna McCarthy

The early *Social Text* collective turned to film analysis and mass culture critique as a way of exploring, in Fredric Jameson's words, new "interpretive possibilities" for Marxism.<sup>1</sup> It is clear from the journal's "Prospectus," published in the first issue, that the ultimate object of such interpretation was not, in fact, cinematic. It was, rather, the problematic bounded by the question of culture's relationship to economy and state, a problematic the collective initially characterized in terms of ideology and narrative and the avant-garde's dialectical engagement with mass culture. *Social Text*, the "Prospectus" proposed, would probe "the interaction between the emancipatory and repressive, critical and reproductive, utopian and integrative tendencies" in forms routinely polarized along axes of "high" and "mass" art (*ST* 1, 1979). Jameson's film essays explored these questions directly, not only the first issue's well-known "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," which examined *Jaws* and the *Godfather* movies, but also short pieces on films such as *The Shining* and *Diva*. They were not intended as works of criticism as much as heuristic examples of what a renewed practice of leftist cultural critique within the humanities might look like, a practice that pushed beyond paranoid models of manipulation, populist anti-intellectualisms, and the "unsatisfactory" elements of Frankfurt School aesthetic hierarchies. "It was my contribution to problems that we were all working on," Jameson explains today.<sup>2</sup> Stanley Aronowitz, whose essay "Film: The Art Form of Late Capitalism" also appeared in the first issue of the journal, puts it more baldly. "You're just supposed to aestheticize everything," he recalled recently, referring to existing paradigms for film studies at the time. "And that I refused to do."<sup>3</sup> Like Spielberg's shark, film emerges from the pages of *Social Text* as a polysemic object, capable of organizing social anxieties and uniting

disparate, conflictual positions. Both are behemoths that demand to be attacked and that promise, in the ensuing chase, the thrill of discovering utopian pathways to new forms of social integration. Of course, in the case of *Jaws*, this integration turns out to be, to quote Jameson, a “new and spurious kind of fraternity,” one that excludes and disempowers even as it raises the faint possibility of alternative forms of social organization. For the early *Social Text* collective, however, writing and thinking about film, or television, or avant-garde theater (all represented in the first issue’s dossier on mass culture) was integral to the effort to reimagine what a journal could do—how it could awaken “the ineradicable drive toward collectivity,” identifying bonds across previously polarized cultural realms that might jog intellectuals into creating new kinds of alliances with each other and with leftists outside the university.

In the ensuing three decades, the initial vision of *Social Text* as a venue for a revitalized mass culture critique has been supplanted by divergent agendas, symptomatic of the shifts in leftist cultural politics taking place in these years. In its first decade, the journal published numerous important and intellectually innovative efforts to read films, television programs, and other mass cultural forms from the Left. Then the terrain shifted; a war had started, requiring a different set of political energies. A 1990 article by Patricia Mann offered incisive remarks on the (im)possibility of a collective response to the war emerging through its mediation (*ST* 27), and the following year a piece by Ella Shohat reflected on the forms of historical mythmaking mustered by media institutions in their efforts to affirm the war’s legitimacy (*ST* 28). But mass cultural critique in *Social Text*—with some important exceptions—seems to have turned away at this moment from the original program outlined in the “Prospectus,” insofar as it became concerned not only with reading mass cultural works but also with arguing about how to read them, and their audiences. This was a period in which emerging movements in U.S. intellectual and political life, coming from both left and right, significantly raised the stakes in debates about the place of popular culture within leftist politics. Something called “cultural studies” was raising a tempest within the teacup world of the disciplines, and at the same time, the so-called culture wars waged by the Right required leftist intellectuals to revisit their “first principles,” as Andrew Ross put it when he argued for a focus on “cultural justice” in his introduction to a symposium on “Popular Culture and Political Correctness” in 1993 (*ST* 36).

In retrospect, the heuristic freedom that characterized the first decade of writing on mass culture in *Social Text* seems very much a product of its moment. Mass culture had not yet been fully constituted as a terrain of political struggle—at least not in the way it would be ten years later, when attacks from conservative forces inside and outside of the university meant

that immersion in the politics of popular culture was a bit like swimming with sharks. For some, the period defined by the culture wars and their aftermath might mark a postlapsarian era in *Social Text*'s history of engaging with mass culture, as it involved a departure from textual politics. But such determinations are themselves inextricably bound up with the agenda set by the culture wars. If the period saw the demise of textual critique, it also reinvigorated the possibilities for collective-making contained within mass cultural writing. In the 1990s, *Social Text* published more articles about music than ever before (hip-hop at home and abroad, gangster rap, radio in India, to name a few examples); it began to look at alternative television and other sites of practice bent on challenging the mainstream media; its conceptualization of audiences and their uses of culture became far more concrete and variegated than a term like *mass* could ever encompass; and its cinematic focus shifted away from Hollywood to encompass articles on topics such as Islamic movie stars, *Hoop Dreams*, Chinese mass culture, and television in Hong Kong, to name a few examples (from *ST* 42, 1995; *ST* 50, 1997; *ST* 55, 1998; and *ST* 58, 1999, respectively). Hollywood still made an appearance—articles on film noir, B-movies, and *West Side Story* appear in two consecutive issues at the turn of the twenty-first century (*ST* 62 and *ST* 63, 2000)—but the historicist and geopolitical concerns of these pieces, and their blithe disregard for the language of “cinema studies,” mark the journal’s commitment to a continual rethinking of the heuristic possibilities of mass culture critique.

At the end of the nineties, this commitment involved a conceptual relocation of “mass culture” from superstructure to base, as part of the journal’s sustained engagement with culture (and education) as domains of value creation. Neither film nor television occupied a particularly privileged place in the articles about cultural labor, cultural policy, and cultural citizenship published by *Social Text* in this period. Their specificity as media forms had little to do with the political problematic defined by contemporary cultural production. Nor, for that matter, did adjectives like *mass* and *popular*. Freighted with idealist implications—the disinterested critic, the imaginary audience—such terms, like the fetishization of one particular medium, obstructed the advance of a program of cultural politics focused on process rather than product. I do not interpret this turn as inherently hostile to the program for leftist cultural analysis outlined in the first issue of the journal, back when its cover announced its commitment to the analysis of ideology in the subtitle “Theory/Culture/Ideology.” If moving away from ideology has involved emphasizing the social over the text, it has also accomplished the rewriting of “high” and “mass” cultural relations the “Prospectus” proposed. And the commitment to examining the production of culture in relation to broader programs of governmentality still involved specifying the “utopian and integrative” tendencies

of cultural work, to say nothing of reification and instrumentalization, albeit within a conceptual and political framework very different from that imagined by the journal's founders. Still, to interpret the last decade of cultural analysis in *Social Text* in such a way does much to blunt the sharply agonistic, even hostile, debates over the relationship between the social and the text in the history of the journal.

If the hostilities have receded, it is perhaps a by-product of the general trajectory of the journal, its institutionalization as a title published by a university press, and its easy assimilation as a domain within the professional lives of the collective's members rather than, as it often seemed to be in the beginning, an adjunct to professional life—a place where people did the work they were unable to do in their day job, work which often involved venturing beyond their disciplinary backwaters to talk about film, television, and other mass cultural forms. As my own day job involves me so much in “classical” cinema studies, and as the area of the U.S. humanities in which I conduct my research (television studies) is a small one, I have turned to *Social Text* as a way of forming collective bonds beyond the discipline. *Social Text* provides access to ideas and debates about political culture that exceed the capacity of film and television analysis, and it has seemed less constructive to fish for contributions within the discipline than to seek out new ways of defining the kinds of leftist political work a journal can accomplish at this particular moment.

This one-hundredth issue is part of this process of redefinition; perhaps more germane to the topic of mass culture, however, is the development of the *Social Text* Web site. The promise of the latter lies, it seems to me, in the possibility of reconfiguring the agenda laid out in the “Prospectus” yet again. Going online in order to create a space of immediate and polemical dialogue; going “mass” in the unclear, even contradictory, way that the Internet is a mass medium; going forward from the project of commenting on cultural texts or their modes of production to actual participation in the process of multimedia, hypertextual production—this trajectory seems like the logical next step in the narrative I've sketched here. If this narrative sounds both utopian and conservative—*Social Text* evolving from manifesto to *Gesamtkunstwerk*—it is also in keeping with the spirit of risk and exploration that has defined the journal since its inception.

## Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, telephone interview by Brent Hayes Edwards, 15 January 2009.
2. Ibid.
3. Stanley Aronowitz, interview by Brent Hayes Edwards and Anna McCarthy, 3 October 2009.

# The Future of Journals

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**John Brenkman:** Journals get started when some group of people—even if it’s small—comes together around some thing they want to write and they have no place to put it. And if you can tap enough creative sources for whom your journal serves that function, it’ll float, I think. But it’s still an uphill struggle in terms of the financing and the marketing and so on. I think materially it’s going to be harder and harder to launch journals and to get people to actually buy them because of the Internet and particularly because a journal is something that most people don’t read cover to cover. They only want a couple of things out of any given issue. In that sense, anybody doing a journal these days is swimming upstream.

**Anders Stephanson:** When I talked to Fred about *Social Text* in retrospect sometime around 1994, he—in just, in a typical Fred way—said, “The moment of journals is over.” It was really good for me because I reconciled myself with that. I gave eleven to twelve years of a very important period of my life to this. It was centrally the most important intellectual and political thing I did. Just like it was the party of 1979 for him, in 1994 he says, “the moment”—in a Hegelian sense—“is now expired.” Now it’s another thing.

**Sohnya Sayres:** There’s so much out there now. It would be wonderful if every month people could go to their mailbox and find something that they could not otherwise find. Shake down old thought patterns, bring in the new. But this country is so large and so strangely constructed, with collapsing empires and military ambitions and confused ideas about itself. Who knows what energy people need? And some of the blogs are about as useful as you’re ever going to be on these subjects. So is that the way to go? I don’t know.

**Bruce Robbins:** Yes, I absolutely still believe in the little magazine—partly because the big magazines have let us down. There’s an opportunity to say certain things that are very, very hard to say in the *New York Times*, right? I’ve had some great experiences—finding out that Tony Kushner read *Social Text*, finding out that James Schamus read *Social Text*! Who would have thought that Tony Kushner would know about *Social Text*? But he was moving in those circles. And I guess I believe the chains of connection, most often invisible but every once in a while becoming visible, are real things and the little magazines really do sustain a kind of culture.

# Governmentality

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Tariq Jazeel

Since the publication of Michel Foucault's 1978 lectures on governmentality, it has become increasingly commonplace to understand the circulation of power as a decentered process.<sup>1</sup> Instead of identifying government with the centralized locus of state rule, a burgeoning governmentality literature has argued that governmental power operates through the production of discursive normalizations, political rationalities, and techniques of regulation that ultimately produce subjects that *behave as they ought*. In *Social Text* 43 (1995), David Scott's article "Colonial Governmentality" developed this line of thinking to move toward a better understanding of the operation of colonial power. His influential piece set forth ways of understanding the political terrains that colonial power made possible: what new forms of subjectivity, society, and normalcy Europe's insertion into the lives of the colonized organized and produced. He did so by working through one particular historical instance: the formation of Sri Lanka's modernity, which he traced back to British Ceylon's Colebrooke-Cameron constitutional reforms of the early 1830s. These institutional changes, Scott skillfully shows, constituted a crucial break with the past, ushering in Sri Lanka's modernity by way of "*the introduction of a new game of politics* that the colonized would (eventually) be obliged to play if they were to be counted as political" (emphasis in original).

"Colonial Governmentality" has created an extensive series of critical openings for a range of work that has subsequently explored the dispersed strategies and effects of colonial power and its relationships to political modernity.<sup>2</sup> But I am not so interested in mapping these wide, wavering, and hugely productive proliferations. Rather, and in line with this thirtieth anniversary issue, I am more interested in how a reading of Scott's article speaks to some of the things that a critical leftist journal like *Social Text* must take seriously in its continual pursuit of responsible and effective

interventionary modes of critical thought. In what follows I want to suggest, first, that the very composition of Scott's article says much about the role that journals like *Social Text* play in the task of critical knowledge production more generally. And second, leading from this, I want to suggest that we can productively think critical knowledge production itself through the notion of governmentality to signal some useful questions about the relationships between any journal's institutional locatedness and the terrains of modern critical rationality.

What interests me about Scott's article is a productive tension between the universal and the particular. That is to say, the more or less universal theoretical argument the article puts forward about the political rationalities that colonial power makes possible (hence its influence) is only enabled by a quite particular engagement with the trajectories of colonial power in the postcolony Sri Lanka, the case study. Indeed, this is a tension common to the wider governmentality literature wherein a general theory about power is advanced by engaging very particular "texts of rule."<sup>3</sup> But more than this, a close rereading of Scott's article suggests how "colonial governmentality" was only useful insofar as it enabled him to critically work through pressing, quite particular, social and political questions *in the Sri Lankan context*.

The article itself reveals a number of clues regarding this particularism. As early as the first page, for example, Scott refers to the article as a set of "notes": "inasmuch as they are, in many ways, only the tentative explorations of a working paper." Indeed, at the time, the article was a step toward a monograph on the making of political modernity in colonial Ceylon that was intended as an intervention into debates around Sri Lanka's constitutional history and the ethnic conflict.<sup>4</sup> Though that book was not written, the article became the first chapter in Scott's excellent 1999 monograph *Refashioning Futures*, roughly half of which is an in-depth exploration of culture, political rationality, and colonial power in Sri Lanka. And, in the acknowledgements to that book, we learn that "Colonial Governmentality," together with other chapters, was drafted in Colombo, Sri Lanka, during a period when the author was a fellow at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES). "Colonial Governmentality," it seems, owes much to the conversations Scott had with Colombo-based critical scholars and activists, all of whom at the time were working through pressing social and political questions concerning Sri Lanka's violent, ethnicized conflict. Finally, Scott's article is consistent in its persistent claim that understanding the effects of colonial power requires attentiveness to colonialism's specific targets in any given historical (one could add, geographical) instance, lest we "run the risk of a too hasty homogenization of colonialism as a whole." On this reading, "Colonial Governmentality" is mired in Sri Lanka's particularities. Location matters.

At the same time, however, Sri Lanka is barely mentioned until the fourteenth page of a twenty-four-page article. The first half of the article works in detail through a theoretical argument about “colonial governmentality” as a way of approaching colonial power. Only in the article’s last half are the particularities of colonial power’s productions of political rationality in the Sri Lankan case (study) addressed. So despite the article’s engagement with the particular in all the ways I have suggested above, it works by advancing “colonial governmentality” as a theoretical intervention into the problem of how we can conceive of colonial power in general. In fact, it is worth stressing that “Colonial Governmentality” is positioned as a sympathetic response to Partha Chatterjee’s prior argument about colonial power’s distinctiveness from modern power.<sup>5</sup> In such ways are advances in theoretical work and understanding performed and achieved.

The point I want to emphasize here is that the play between, on the one hand, the demands of speaking to quite particular social and political vexations in place and, on the other, making a contribution to the universal terrain of a “broader theoretical literature” (what David Harvey refers to in *ST* 42 [1995] as the play between “militant particularism and global ambition”) is I think symptomatic of the effects of the metropolitan locatedness of leftist knowledge production institutions such as *Social Text*. In other words, it is simply inevitable that for *Social Text* to carry the article it would need to address a picture bigger than just Sri Lanka’s postcolonial social and political modernity. Understandably, it would need to advance a theoretical position vis-à-vis colonial power in general to satisfy the demand that the article be of interest and use to those whose work lies beyond the provincial domain of the specifically Sri Lankan.

Once again, we can say location matters. *Social Text*’s location within the Euro-American metropolitan spaces of critical, interdisciplinary thought places quite particular demands on the shape of critical academic knowledge production. Articles we publish—particularly those that focus on the global South—must manage to advance thought first and foremost around theoretical and political questions of concern beyond the particularities of place. Addressing the nuances of a politics located specifically in non-Euro-American places is at best a secondary requirement. To be clear, these demands are not unique to *Social Text*. They apply equally to demands most peer-reviewed journals make of their contributors. Neither should these demands be taken simply as disabling. They are wholly desirable inasmuch as the privilege of learning and tackling the theoretical and political conundrums of our time from a kaleidoscopically worldly array of case studies is central to the intellectual freedom that propels the dynamism of intellectual work.

But this aspect of knowledge production is a privilege, and for the

sake of humane, responsible, and, not least, effective modes of critical, leftist knowledge-production-to-come, at *Social Text* we must be aware of this politics of institutional location. We must be aware that this is another case of Europe's insertion into our lives, into the life of critical knowledge production itself. The question heuristically posed is: how do the demands we make on theory objects and theoretical rigor connect with specific political demands located in place? And in posing that question, one of our aims at *Social Text* must be to avoid the easy abstraction of theoretical knowledge such that it becomes disconnected from the places in and through which critical thought must be set to work. As Edward Said reminded us in his essay "Travelling Theory," a theory, lest we work it through the specificities of context, perennially runs the risk of moving up into a sort of "bad infinity" that expansively claims to singularly frame the world in its entirety.<sup>6</sup> David Scott's article is an object lesson in how to effectively tack back and forth between the particular and universal; of how to satisfy the demands of a metropolitan readership by advancing critical thought beyond the particular while not losing any of the social and political incisiveness that the call of place demands. But his article is instructive in other ways as well. Its focus on governmentality reminds us that part of what critical, leftist knowledge production institutions like *Social Text* do is train, foster, and secure the contours and conduct of critical intervention itself by placing such demands on authors. The very industry and infrastructure of the intellectual work in which most Euro-American academic journals participate produces its own field of power effects: a governmentality that secures an ongoing production of critical thought that, in order to make it to publication, must seek out global theoretical impact and ambition first, and only then address a more provincial and grounded politics of place.

I return then to Scott's articulation of his own task in setting forth, in *ST* 43, to explore the political rationalities that European colonial power created in Sri Lanka. The question he usefully poses is

What then is the *conceptual* level to be assigned to "Europe," understood not merely as a geographical space but as an apparatus of dominant power-effects? My question, it is easy to see, presupposes that the critique of European hegemony in the construction of knowledges about the non-European world—the so-called "decentering" of Europe—ought not to be confused (as I think it very often is) with programmatically ignoring Europe, as though by seeking to do so one would have resolved the problem of Eurocentrism.

If we take "Europe" as metonym for the Euro-American institutional locatedness of the criteria, checks, and balances that arbitrate on the quality of critical leftist knowledge production, we are left to ponder the role that *Social Text* plays in a kind of governmentality of critical knowledge produc-

tion, what Dipesh Chakrabarty may call the artifice, not of history, but of critical leftist knowledge itself.<sup>7</sup> This is to raise a necessary, if uncomfortable, question over the theoretical generalizations and rationalities that drive Euro-American intellectual work in the present. Specifically, what challenges does this governmentality of critical knowledge production pose for seeking out effective, creative, and generative intellectual representations in place? Thought this way, governmentality offers a provocation to regard the role of the collective theoretical expertise and professional certainties of journals like *Social Text* in a broader politics of knowledge production. An ongoing and humble introspection into our own practices and effects on the conduct and terrain of critical rationality is, I suggest, crucial for *Social Text's* effective political and interventionary longevity; for the *ST* 200 to come.

## Notes

1. See Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*, trans. Graham Burchell (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

2. See Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); James Duncan, *In the Shadows of the Tropics: Climate, Race and Biopower in Nineteenth Century Ceylon* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); and Margo Huxley, “Space and Government: Governmentality and Geography,” *Geography Compass* 2 (2008): 1635–58.

3. Pat O’Malley, Lorna Weir, and Clifford Shearing, “Governmentality, Criticism, Politics,” *Economy and Society* 26 (1997): 502.

4. Personal correspondence with David Scott, 10 November 2008.

5. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

6. Edward Said, “Travelling Theory,” in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 239.

7. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?” *Representations* 37 (1992): 1–26.

# Hip-Hop

Michael Ralph

Christopher Holmes Smith, in *ST 77* (2003), charts the rise of the hip-hop mogul—the young, black, male multimillionaire—whose commercial viability derives from the strategic deployment of a personal biography tailored to the marketplace, as he secures sales from people who may well share his hometown but not his close ties to the nation’s wealthy elite. This familiar trope—the rags to riches triumph of an outlaw, redeemed—has a particular resonance for a generation born in the wake of social movements that created unprecedented opportunities for education, employment, and civic engagement. But as much as his (at times, her; but, usually, his) profit potential, the rapper’s public persona is structured by specific techniques for framing and narrating the past. Consequently, the stage is set for scholarship on hip-hop that is likely to reframe the debates in which this genre has been enmeshed for the past few decades. At the risk of contradicting all scholarly work, journalistic accounts, and even what practitioners, themselves, usually say about hip-hop, I would like to tender the proposition that it did not arise organically in the late 1970s. Hip-hop is, instead, an artifact of the late 1980s/early 1990s.

When this subculture first surfaced in New York, the terms *hip-hop* and *rap music* were used interchangeably. Hip-hop emerged as a distinct cultural form as part of two interrelated developments. First, the commercial potential of the genre defied all expectations. While rap music was deemed unfit even for music award competitions well into the 1980s, it would, a decade later, surpass staples like alternative and rock music in sales and popularity. By the turn of the millennium, rap music would dominate award shows and expressive culture more broadly.

Then, there was the persecution rap music faced during the 1990s, when the U.S. Congress debated its detrimental effects amid a moral panic

that viewed inner-city gangbangers and drug dealers as obstacles to American democracy and decency.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of 1980s fiscal conservatism, and the chronic unemployment that subsequently besieged U.S. cities, new technologies emerged for producing “crack,” creating a pervasive and inexpensive substitute for cocaine. To defend territory and maximize profits, domestic cartels acquired assault weaponry. Meanwhile, the criminal justice system developed stiffer penalties for crack distribution than for cocaine, as the path to the White House was paved by politicians tough on crime and critical of the music produced by a population now seen as the foremost domestic threat (along with the looming presence of Islamic terrorism). In this moment, the interests of professional scholars, fans of hip-hop, and rap pioneers converged to create criteria that ultimately sought to distinguish the genre’s most innovative, and progressive aspects from “rap music,” which they considered crass, violent, and misogynistic — devoid of any aesthetic criteria worth discussing. There soon emerged a consensus that hip-hop consists of four elements: DJ-ing, graffiti, break dancing, and emceeing (rhyming). In the process, they retroactively erected an aesthetic resilient enough to withstand criticism; they reproduced a generational cleavage similar to the one that was already being used to condemn the musical sensibilities of the “post-Soul” generation (though the idea that young people today have no taste in music, like the idea that they are apathetic, relies on a fantasy that the 1960s and 1970s mark an era defined exclusively by social transformation and immense artistry). If few people noticed that hip-hop was actually being created when fans and practitioners erected the aesthetic standard they would subsequently use to define it, it is because the scholarship has been concerned primarily with defending the art form against attacks by conservative politicians who believe that rap music fans and practitioners are responsible for social decay (and, by extension, the social problems that surface in the lyrics). Meanwhile, more critical scholars have been so keen to dismantle the knee-jerk reactions of people who are not interested in or who don’t understand hip-hop that they frequently overlook the way hip-hop surfaces uncritically as an aesthetic ideal in conversations designed to disarticulate it from its commercial counterpart (where “hip-hop heads” do it for the love, while “rappers” do it for the money).<sup>2</sup> The tendency for hip-hop enthusiasts to measure the genre against an imaginary golden age evidences a curious brand of nostalgia: a mixture of homesickness, loss, and longing that coheres in the angst of a generation (see Joan Morgan’s “Fly-Girls, Bitches, and Hoes: Notes of a Hip-Hop Feminist,” *ST* 45, 1995). Meanwhile rappers and politicians blame each other for the demise of disadvantaged communities, as each discourse harkens back to a time of prosperity that never existed. Put another way, the idea that commodification has displaced a genuine

concern with social change is what rappers and public intellectuals tend to say about *each other*.

Thus while a fuller treatment of hip-hop should include substantial attention to its global reach and to the oft-neglected musical influence and production of female emcees, executives, and producers, there is also an urgent need to reframe the ongoing discussion about male emcees and the idea of masculine authority that structures the way that conversation tends to unfold. The tension between the civil rights and post-civil rights “generations” appears caught in a moment of “parallax,” like the difference between a camera’s viewfinder and its lens: they apprehend the same scenario, but from perspectives that can’t possibly align.<sup>3</sup> Maybe these vantage points aren’t meant to be reconciled but to enhance and enrich each other? Both generations rely on problematic conceptions of masculine authority, yet there is a persistent cleavage between them that emerges from the difference between an abiding—versus a crisis of—faith in U.S. democracy and from vastly different strategies for managing desire: this is the central distinction in what has become a debate about the relationships among art, gender, sexuality, and politics that obtain in black expressive culture of the past few decades.

Hip-hop’s most promising intervention grows from its preoccupation with desire and fantasy. This tends to be a chauvinistic male fantasy, but hip-hop actually narrates a range of sexual practices. Some rappers develop coded queer personas, even if they refuse to identify that way. And rap music that reveals an abiding interest in erotic power remains indebted to feminism while, ironically, expressing callous disregard for the female, queer, and gender nonconforming populations offended by its licentious messages.

While feminist scholarship on hip-hop has made invaluable contributions to an ongoing critical conversation by highlighting the overriding tendency for rap artists to figure women as vehicles for sexual satisfaction and emblems of status, it has inadvertently contributed to political projects that are primarily invested in ridding music of sexual content, altogether. The literature on hip-hop tends to celebrate music deemed “positive,” “conscious,” or “progressive,” though these stances breed music that, ironically, tends to be no less patriarchal: instead of “bitches” and “hoes,” the conversation centers on female virtue, which is often oppressive in its own right, given the way that women, as “wives” (as “mothers”), are expected to do the work of solidifying and reproducing the heteronormative black family privileged as the bedrock of a black community—a black nation. If not all scholars working on hip-hop sanction this particular stance on gender politics, they have not yet developed an alternative critical tradition. For all its insight concerning racial exclusion and sexualized violence, “black

feminism has,” as Jennifer C. Nash has noted, “permitted a pernicious sexual conservatism, wearing the guise of racial progressivism, to seep into the analytic framework,” where “sexual conservatism” is defined by the “tendency to foreground examinations of black women’s sexual exploitation, oppression, and injury at the expense of analyses attentive to black women’s sexual heterogeneity, multiplicity, and diversity” (see “Strange Bedfellows: Black Feminism and Antipornography Feminism,” *ST* 97, 2008).

A sincere investment in artistic and political freedom would need to distinguish between lyrics that discuss sexual desires and the slimmer category of those that encourage or enable sexual violence. Some of the same scholars who critique and challenge the disproportionate incarceration rates of African Americans (and black men, in particular) often seem incapable of managing unhealthy attitudes about sex and gender without resort to policing the kind of music rap artists produce. This form of political engagement is, in a sense, more violent than profane lyrics, where the impulse to repress sexuality is symptomatic of—and a causal factor in producing—traumatic sexual experiences. And to the extent that commercially viable rappers create personas that are only partly based on their true beliefs and perceptions about the world, the discourse on women in hip-hop might well be a proxy for the broader range of intimate liaisons rappers develop but are reluctant to discuss, perhaps because they conflict with the idea of masculinity they would prefer to promote (or the brand of manhood they have been contracted to produce and market).

When confronting this exploitative economy of female labor and expertise, analysts might consider substituting greater deliberation concerning the emotional, political, and economic maneuvers through which women navigate the intricate matrix of desire that structures the hip-hop experience for the moral indignation that too often defines the scholarship on this subject. In the academic literature critiquing hip-hop’s misogyny, we find a reversal of sociologist and U.S. senator Daniel Moynihan’s dogmatically heteronormative report concerning the alleged preponderance of emasculating women who are forced to manage African American households by themselves due to a dearth of adequate male partners: the black female is, this time, not the villain but the hapless victim.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the black woman as an archetype in what we might, to borrow a term, call “the anatomy of national [perhaps even, nationalist] fantasy” remains undertheorized.<sup>5</sup> Insofar as historical specificity may be of value here, it seems useful to point out that the signal trope of the misogynistic hip-hop music video—the scantily clad, sexually overcharged video vixen—is a rather more recent invention than the prevailing literature would suggest. This particular figuration of female sexuality became prevalent in the early 1990s, in the aftermath of the exorbitant profits, and high rates of death and incarceration, crack cocaine trafficking generated in urban enclaves.

Much of the scholarship that sets itself the task of trying to explain how and why male rappers exploit video vixens fails to integrate the firsthand account of women who have worked within the hip-hop music video industry. In her *Confessions of a Video Vixen*, Karrine Steffans remarks that she was the only woman willing to wear the nipple pasties she was handed on the set of Mystikal's "Shake It Fast" video shoot. The rest of the women who performed alongside her, she insists, were "professional" models, thus unwilling to don the attire or perform the sexual acts for which she would eventually become legendary.<sup>6</sup> Despite these sorts of nuanced insights, the critique of brash female sexuality in the rap music industry centers on the unfounded allegation that hip-hop has some kind of "hold"<sup>7</sup> over black women, instead of trying to understand what might motivate young women to position themselves—or lead them to be positioned—in these particular sorts of ways (see Morgan, "Fly-Girls, Bitches, and Hoes," *ST* 45, 1995). Scholars who are justifiably concerned that hip-hop promotes easy access to women—and African American women, in particular—might wish to heed insights born from the scholarship on sex work, which suggests that undoing the social stigma around prostitution and helping to make sex work legal would offer social actors greater protections and greater flexibility in terms of how they grant access to their bodies. As Anne McClintock has noted in *ST* 37 (1993): "Far from 'selling their bodies [indiscriminately] to men,' sex workers" instead tend to "exchange specific services, often for very good money, carefully negotiating the time, the terms, the amount, and the exact service, demanding, though too seldom receiving, the respect that other workers in the social service sector receive." The politics of respectability—like the conservative discourse on sex education—ultimately has unintended effects that harm the populations these political projects claim to be serving, for disempowering sex workers places control of the industry in the "hands of police, abusive clients, and pimps." Respect for women should include respect for female entrepreneurs even if they exhibit a moral code that is uncomfortable for a social movement tradition that stresses the moral exemplar. If I have suggested the critique of misogyny in hip-hop is inadequate, it is only because I consider it to be incomplete. What if the video vixen was treated—and theorized—as a kind of sex worker? What if sexually explicit hip-hop was treated as adult entertainment? As pornography? What if you had to be eighteen—or twenty-one—to purchase rap music that was categorized thusly? This sort of reconfiguration would change the structure of the entire industry, shifting the focus from rappers to label owners and executives. The key issue would cease to be a production problem ("Why do rappers produce obscene music, riddled with profanity?") and would become a distribution problem ("What laws ought to govern the sale of music filled with violence, sex, and adult references?").

These changes in the marketplace would also, no doubt, raise other issues that the scholarship on hip-hop has neglected to explore in depth. While many rappers have, in the past fifteen years, become incorporated as record label owners, none of the distribution companies with which they partner are owned by African Americans. Why hasn't any black billionaire—or any contingent of hip-hop moguls—tried to purchase or establish a distribution company, when we know that such a venture would necessarily result in greater autonomy? This line of inquiry ought to likewise provoke a shift in the way we study and discuss hip-hop. Why, if 70 to 75 percent of the people who purchase and own hip-hop music are white, hasn't hip-hop become a robust field of inquiry in whiteness studies? Taking questions like these more seriously is one way to ensure that future scholarship on hip-hop is even brighter than its glorious past.

## Notes

1. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Robin D. G. Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: 'Gangsta Rap' and Postindustrial Los Angeles," in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 190.

2. In her landmark study *Black Noise*, Rose writes that "hip-hop culture began taking shape in New York City" during her "teenage years" (ix), though the phrase "hip-hop culture" would have been unthinkable at the moment she is describing. Likewise, Jeff Chang, in his authoritative study *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), refers to the slew of rappers, DJ's, breakdancers, and graffiti artists he interviewed about their pioneering efforts to create a new performance genre in New York City during the latter 1970s as "hip-hop heads" (90), though this phrase is an artifact of the 1990s.

3. On "parallax," see Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), and Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

4. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 1965).

5. See Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

6. Karrine Steffans, *Confessions of a Video Vixen* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).

7. T. Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimps Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold on Young Black Women* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

# Ideology

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**Stefano Harney**

I do have an ideology.

—Milton Friedman, *Financial Times*, 2008

Hard Core Republican Is Turning Cisco into a Socialist Enterprise

—Headline in *Fast Company* magazine, November 2008

When Michael E. Brown published his “Ideology and the Metaphysics of Content” (*ST* 8, 1983), Marxian analysis of ideology, so prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s, was only beginning to yield to the insights and practices of cultural studies. Brown’s brilliant piece still teaches us what was at stake in that transition. The essay warns us against starting from the premise of a politics that knows itself as complete. Under such circumstances, a fully formed politics can only confront a subject as an external force. The analyst is left with this clash of subject and text, and of what is true and what is false in this face-off. It is little wonder that this kind of analysis fed a metaphysics of correct content on the Left that was ultimately alien to historical materialism. To help us avoid this trap of a text whose meaning is revealed and guarded by analysts, Brown makes a distinction between what he calls analysis and something he calls simply reading.

He demonstrated what he meant by reading by taking us through a close reading of the first chapter of Marx’s *Capital*, as an example of how the subject of politics might be present at her own making, in a self-educative confrontation with the materials that remain in the moment and in history. Rather than presenting us with a text that unfolds its eternal truth, to an empty or misinformed subject, Brown shows the way that Marx’s writing teaches before it instructs in a style that allows the reader to build her own case. We learn that every new reading of this writing is

a process of self-development in which the materials and the subject are transformed anew in another historical moment. Here politics only knows itself in the encounter and the subject only becomes herself in the same encounter. The question of how ideology relates to the subject could no longer be posed under these conditions of reading.

And yet, today, ideology again trips from the tongues of those who can be heard, and politics presents itself as known and knowing. The only question, once again, is one of choice or imposition, truth or falsity. Financial crisis and a looming depression provoke comment in the media, in government, and in universities about the ideology of neoliberalism and its falsity. Lack of regulation is said to have created the crisis. Globalization is said to have made it worse, and the dominance of markets over states to have made it more difficult to fix. The airwaves and conference halls are full of talk about ideological error and excess. There are attempts to purge these deviations, aimed at both banks and bankers. But the purges are curiously weak and ineffective. All this talk imagining a public sphere is what Brown called chatter, and it accumulates as those listening invest in certain meanings. At the time of this writing, it is that the failure of Lehman Brothers precipitated the crisis, but already chatter about the nature and cause of the crisis is accumulating again, and will require some new investment if it is not to descend entirely into noise, or perhaps one should say ascend.

It is not unusual for voices in these centers of power to talk about ideology or to use the word. But in the past this term has normally been applied to someone else. Classically, democracy and capitalism were not ideologies but optimal states of human existence, particularly as they were understood by antagonists of the cold war. This understanding was updated in the Bush Doctrine, which tended in its analysis to substitute one for the other more freely than in the past, in a kind of collapse of disciplines that mocked interdisciplinarity. But if there is something new here in the return of ideology, it is certainly this: Why has this term now been made safe for democracy, and even for capitalism? Why does Milton Friedman now have an ideology?

In a sense ideology had already made a return in response to the provocation of the latest announcement of the end of ideology, distributed during the global victory parade of neoliberalism. That periodic bulletin always implicitly meant the victory of democracy and capitalism over ideology, both its internal infection and external plague. Still it did not announce the victory of neoliberal ideology over cold-war competitors, but the death of the only ideologies, those of these competitors. Taking up the traditional cold-war challenge, and perhaps sensing that cultural studies had allowed itself to be misread as neutral in this battle, scholars like Slavoj Žižek heralded a bold return to ideology and ideology critique.<sup>1</sup> Žižek, for

instance, suggested in one update of Louis Althusser on the commodity fetish that it is not a question of people thinking that a car or a suit is some independent and magical object, and not just a car or a suit, but rather that they are forced to behave in daily life like a car or a suit does indeed carry these properties. In another attempt, he says that ideology is most effective when it is true. But is such a defense necessary?

Brown begins his 1983 essay with an account of the rise of academic Marxism and the price it paid for acceptance, a price it soon forgot was a tactic and started to regard as a quality of its own work. Marxism became a discipline among others, guarded and interpreted its texts like others, and regarded those texts as having a meaning independent of their reading and history. This turned any teaching of such texts into a relationship of master and slave. Žižek is too dialectical a thinker to be caught in this academicism, although there are certainly still plenty of examples of those on the Left who would like to get the diagnosis of the current crisis right for us. But his reinvigoration of ideology critique hides an inescapable fact, and one to which that this academic Marxism contributed. And that fact is that there is indeed an end to ideology, or rather there are now ends to ideology, because ideology has entered the world of things.

Neoliberalism and its mirror opposite, post-Marxism, both coming into force at the time Brown's essay was published, could not by themselves, of course, enact this disenchantment with ideology, a disenchantment that has led to its tame use today as an identity category. Certainly neoliberalism has long been shown to have little to do with an ideological commitment, freely producing antistatist statism, as Ruth Gilmore calls it in the United States, and a fortress in Europe based on the restriction of commodity trade and commodity labor.<sup>2</sup> But to be able to wear ideology like a garment in the way we see routinely in the chatter of the current crisis required a certain laboring of ideology, a putting to work of politics.

This is not a matter of what used to be called commodification in ideology critique, of Che on a T-shirt.<sup>3</sup> It is rather the way politics has come into the workplace not as interference with production, or a lubricant, but as a tool of production. We are familiar with its symptoms: swarm intelligence, humane workplaces, wkinomics, cultural diversity, and corporate social responsibility. Here immaterial labor that cannot be easily identified, cognitive and affective capacities not already attuned to labor-power, are gathered through politics, through ideology, and put to work. This includes also reflection on this use of politics through the discipline of business and management studies.<sup>4</sup> To see these symptoms as ameliorations of contradiction in the workplace is to miss the dependence of capitalism on this politics of organization, and to fall back into an ideology critique. It is not that this new laboring of ideology does not require critique, but rather that such a critique should work outward from the labor process in

an updated version of what Italian Marxists would call the social factory. Still the risk remains that the corpse of the old ideology critique will be animated by the gathering storm.

Indeed it is tempting to think that this storm will clarify the content of capitalism, making the formulation of a political strategy possible in light of this clarity. It is equally tempting to think the crisis will reveal the domination that would make such a strategy popular. But if Brown's essay teaches us anything, it is that this kind of objective analysis of capitalism leaves no room for the development of politics, since what is complete in capital will necessarily demand its opposite in politics, in pedagogy, and ultimately in the subject. Instead, it seems important to think about crisis as the disruption of any settled notion of content or text, and of any analysis. Randy Martin did just this in his reading of the financialization of daily life during a period when capitalist crisis was ordinary rather than extraordinary.<sup>5</sup>

In a similar way, I would like to use a brief account from my own experience teaching undergraduate students strategy in a University of London business school to see if I can make some sense of the pedagogy Brown inspires at this present conjuncture where banking is declared to be in crisis. Instead, we wanted to approach the crisis phenomenologically, as something unpredictable, unraveling, and unknowable on its own, something that only gathers meaning and is transformed by our own encounter with it over time, in history. We were determined to start with the encounters as we found them, in daily media reports, in the lives of students and their families, in observations about the rest of their education, and in examinations of the personal strategies students brought with them and in which they placed, if not faith, then hope. For our part, we tried to meet the crisis with the students, not suppressing our critique so much as allowing it to be led on by the materials, events, and experiences of the economic crisis in London and the undergraduate students who had chosen to study business "to help them get a job." We began the conversations in this lecture hall each week and we brought material and information, but we allowed questions and comments to move the conversation.

We ended the semester talking about this hold on us and our hold on others as a kind of possession. From thinking of a house as a possession we moved to thinking about how our debt meant we possessed each other, with all that meant for us, from the worst aspects of human property to spiritual inflection to something like debt as responsibility to others, something like love.<sup>6</sup> We concluded by asking how we could have the freedom that these personal strategies implied, given the necessity that seemed to go with this mutual possession. How could we get from this necessity and responsibility to others something more, and something different? At this point in our encounter with the crisis, we started to formulate what we wanted. We

wanted the wealth that came from making promises to each other, but we wanted also some initiative, some say in what kind of promises we made. But we also agreed we should give the same to others in their debt to us. Most of all we wanted to organize this around a principle where everyone who wanted to make promises and receive promises could do so, where debt was possible, not impossible, where promises are possible.

Brown begins his article by warning presciently about the production of a metaphysics of politics on the Left, and we can see today that this Marxian academicism helped prepare ideology for its entry into the world of things. Today a politics that promises what it cannot deliver is now a feature both of government and workplace. But this claim of politics to know itself completely, at Cisco Systems and Shell just as at the *New York Times* and the *Financial Times*, to say nothing of that claim in the mouths of politicians, does not just fail to secure a world of promise but burns promise as its fuel.

Brown concludes his reading by saying that one cannot find oneself by obliterating one's moments. The students' commitment to debt, to promises, and to their strategies gradually produced from these moments a politics of promise itself. This politics would measure debt not by its repayment but by the different strategies it could sustain. It falls to us to elaborate with them this politics of the mutual possession into which they have already placed us.

## Notes

1. See, for instance, Slavoj Žižek, *Did Someone Say Totalitarianism?* (London: Verso, 2001).

2. Ruth Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

3. An anachronistic version of this commodification critique is the recent book by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2007).

4. Stefano Harney, "Why Is Management a Cliché?" *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 16 (2005): 579–91.

5. Randy Martin, *The Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

6. See, for instance, Michael Hardt, "About Love. European Graduate School Seminar 2007 4/6," YouTube, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ndnkjnMxxLc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ndnkjnMxxLc) (accessed 3 June 2009).

# Independent Publishing

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**John Brenkman:** We started out kind of idealistically, you'd have to say. We didn't want institutional support; we were committed to the idea being completely independent. You know, *Social Text*, *TELOS*, *New German Critique*—we were all what Germans called “tendency” journals that tried to put a position forward in the world on certain questions.

**Stanley Aronowitz:** We didn't want to go to any university press or anything like that, to begin with. We wanted to be self-published. And the reason we wanted to be self-published was because we felt that we had to establish a track record and we had to establish our will to being independent.

**Fredric Jameson:** Nobody wanted to publish anything like this in the old days, so we really had to do this ourselves. Later on, evidently, the presses were buying these journals up and at that point they were very interested in doing it.

**Andrew Ross:** There was the issue of the independence, the self-reliance of the journal. That was a huge political issue. The conditions of production of the journal. There were a lot of people who felt very fiercely devoted to independent production. We had a distributor who got the journal into bookstores, local bookstores. And there was the idea that there was a politics to that. And in the course of time there issued a big debate about whether to take the journal to Duke.

**Sohnya Sayres:** I remember I opposed it very hard—and I was one of the people making all the dinners! So why was I opposing this move so much? We needed the money, we needed the regular help, we needed editorial support. We needed all those things. But being tied to a university press, you get caught in a kind of bind: when you want to get truly creative, you still have this production schedule you have to meet, and that's not how

we worked before. When we were in whatever discursive breakdown we were in, we had time to recollect, to think about it, and start afresh. But with a press, it's rationalized, you're in a mechanical production problem: that commercial machinery puts you on a conveyor belt of some kind. If you want to gather in for a year or two and really think through new avenues, new ways of doing things—suddenly there's no time. What bothered me about centralizing, commercializing, was the fear that that kind of marvelously contentious moment would dissipate into regularity. And without that edginess—without those fierce tugs-of-war—the journal would become a fine vehicle for new disciplines out there (which is a perfectly good use for any journal), but it wouldn't have that other quality.

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# Labor and Class

Rick Maxwell

In its first decade, *Social Text* published work on labor and class that fell within the journal's broader project to define the contours of a Marxist cultural critique, a cultural Marxism. This offered a forum for studies on labor's representation in popular culture alongside conventional Marxist concerns with the conditions of work, relations of production, the reproduction of class strata (in mostly sociological terms), and class consciousness (via ideological analyses à la Frankfurt School, Louis Althusser, British cultural studies, etc.). Commodification was a key context—in particular, the role of commodity fetishism in erasing labor and labor practices from public consciousness in parallel to the decline of the labor movement. The journal had an abiding interest in the place of labor and the labor movement within the ongoing development of Marxism (see especially Stanley Aronowitz in *ST* 2, 1979; 9/10, 1984; 12, 1985; and 18, 1987). There was also new leftist interest in spontaneous and unruly quotidian modes of resistance (in the West), which stood at variance with the old left view of organized labor at the center of historical change (for example, Michel de Certeau et al., *ST* 3, 1980). This made the journal a natural home for cultural studies (homegrown and British) as a transitional, at the time, mode of analysis of class/labor and the intersections of class, gender, race, and nation (see Paul Willis and Philip Corrigan, *ST* 7, 1983). Meanwhile, attention also turned to workers and activism in the third world and Eastern Europe—though not yet framed as aspects of a new international division of labor (NIDL). Historical work continued on the labor movement, transformations in relations of production, labor market, skilling and deskilling, and so on. By the end of its first decade, as the journal became more interested in questions of “multinationalism” (later globalization), the “crises” of Marxism, and the end of the Soviet Union, there was a more explicit uptake of interest in the NIDL.

The next ten years began by processing a number of theoretical and empirical challenges from the previous decade, including analyses of the place of the labor movement vis-à-vis new social movements and of post-Fordist or postindustrial characteristics of the NIDL (global dispersion of assembly lines, fragmentation of labor/class consciousness, deunionization, decline of the welfare state, industrial relocation, working conditions in the third world, command and control over the NIDL via communication networks and international trade agreements [e.g., the North American Free Trade Agreement], etc.) (Norman Finkelstein, *ST* 24, 1990; Stanley Aronowitz, *ST* 25/26, 1990; Fredric Jameson, *ST* 28, 1991; *ST* 31/32, 1992, focusing on third-world and postcolonial issues; Cindi Katz et al., *ST* 33, 1992; Philip Neisser and Stanford Schram, *ST* 41, 1994). Other continuities: class and critical theory (Stanley Aronowitz, *ST* 58, 1999); social and cultural reproduction of class (Marianne Conroy, *ST* 54, 1998); race and class (Curtis Márez, *ST* 48, 1996); gender and class; working-class depictions in popular culture (Julie Bettie in *ST* 45, 1995), as well as in the discourse of postindustrialism; the state of the Left and the labor movement (Stanley Aronowitz, *ST* 44, 1995). Attention turned to the “information society” and a new “class” of information worker (hackers, computer designers, and the like) (Kelly Anderson and Annie Goldson, Andrew Ross, Grant Kester, *ST* 35, 1993). This was also the period in which the journal began to publish work on academic labor and the changing working conditions in higher education, inspired in part by graduate student and adjunct activism/unionism (*ST* 39, 1994, on the Yale strike; *ST* 51, 1997, on academic labor).

In the last ten years, editorial interest in class and labor provided space for work on the impoverishment of the American middle class (Randy Martin, *ST* 65, 2000), on the worsening conditions of academic labor (Ellen Willis, *ST* 70, 2002; Christopher Newfield, *ST* 79, 2004), and on theorizing “nonindustrial” informational work of symbol makers and symbol users, described variously as “immaterial labor,” “no-collar workers,” “knowledge workers,” “creative labor,” or “mental labor” (Andrew Ross, Tiziana Teranova, *ST* 63, 2006). The latter was part of an effort to find a theoretical framework to understand working conditions in media, information, design, advertising, fashion, and other areas of the culture industries—seeing such work not merely as a form of creative effort but also as a source of novel cultural sensibilities, tastes, and temperaments (and, as such, as a linchpin in research and development of cultural policy).

Historical and sociological writing on class and labor from the past ten years included new work on class formations in Asia and Latin America (Eric Tang, *ST* 62, 2000; Mike Davis, *ST* 81, 2004) alongside essays on American labor movement history (the latter virtually the sole enterprise of Stanley Aronowitz, who began to insert more and more personal recol-

lections into his contributions). More continuity in this decade: the idea that class struggle is the motor force of historical change was still seen as a Jurassic form of Marxist thought (the exception might be found in the essays on academic labor). The primacy of class-based politics was based on illusions of an “economistic left” that had not come to terms with contemporary processes: for example, class “decomposition and recomposition”; the inextricable links between class structure and gender, race, nation (deterritorialized, reterritorialized); how class identity is “mutually constituted” with race, gender, and sexual identities (not to mention green politics and various defining institutional identities); the fragmentation of class consciousness and fracturing of class solidarity (*ST* 61, 1999, on gay and lesbian workplace struggles; editorial, *ST* 70, 2002; Sara Ahmed, *ST* 79, 2004). If class struggle wasn’t what it used to be, attempts to rethink class and labor during this time could still be found in essays deploying concepts of Marxist political economy along with those using less abstract means of understanding everyday practices of survival, pleasure-seeking, affection, and communication (Andy Merrifield, *ST* 62, 2000). One could still find a few essays using the technical-analytical language of Marxist theory (labor-power, surplus labor, variable capital, etc.). In contrast, most of the work on labor and class used descriptive but analytically expedient phrases in which the noun *labor* was modified by a pertinent adjective: *female*, *industrial*, *creative*, *subaltern*, *casual*, *day*, *rural*, *urban*, *agricultural*, *academic*, *domestic*, and so on—all terms of critical specificity though not necessarily rooted in Marxist notions of labor and class. Some contributions focused on class as an established “system,” while others examined the fluid, contingent aspects that characterize periods of systemic destabilization where micropolitics play a vital role (Swati Ghosh, John Gilliam, *ST* 83, 2005). An abiding interest in reproduction of labor through cultural consumption and education hovered around these studies (Stanley Aronowitz, Tony Tinker, *ST* 79, 2004). One can also appreciate the long-standing interest in how “work” is depicted via media and other institutions (labor unions, state agencies, the World Bank, the International Labor Organization, Left political parties, etc.) (Michael Denning, *ST* 92, 2002).

Whether focusing on the physical nature of work, the organized movement of labor, or the representation and visibility of work and workers (white, male, female, queer, immigrant, African American, Latino, of the global South, and so on), *Social Text*’s contributions to the study of labor and class have enriched the cultural critique of the global political economy and the international division of labor. As the crisis in the global political economy deepens, critical perspectives on labor and class will become increasingly urgent and will hopefully fill even more pages in the next hundred issues of *Social Text*.

Learn the lesson that all  
movements require such (I give  
up on Marxist analysis ???)  
The weakness of this tendency  
is of course ~~that~~ the  
movements that ~~we~~ don't  
exist. Well enough can't be  
left alone. IF there existed

# Marxism

David Kazanjian

“The framework of the journal is Marxist in the broadest sense of the term.” So begins the second paragraph of the “Prospectus” for *Social Text* 1 (1979). Framed like this, a reflection on Marxism and *Social Text* thirty years later seems to have a lot to answer for. Indeed, John Brenkman tries to answer for that framework in his entry for *Social Text* 100 on the “Prospectus” that he helped to draft. Writes Brenkman, in this issue: “Why at the moment that *Social Text* was founded did Marx seem so relevant and liberalism so bankrupt, whereas today—a scant thirty years later—Marxism might reasonably be thought to be dead, while the fundamental elements of liberalism are in need of vigorous defense?” Brenkman’s effort to answer for *Social Text*’s Marxist framework leads him to repeat the familiar old *and* new American left plot of nostalgic reflection (on well-meaning but misguided origins), decisive renunciation (of Marxism as an inevitable “illiberalism”), and sober adoption of former foes (“embrace the ordeal of liberalism,” he advises). Rather than “answer for” Marxism in *Social Text*—as if it were an accusation, an original sin, or a silly delusion of one’s juvenilia—I’ll treat Marxism as, well, a social text.

The word *framework* appears three times on the first page of the “Prospectus” in *Social Text* 1: in the sentence quoted above, as well as in references to “the dialectical framework” and the “Marxist framework” that will allow the journal to raise and discuss political and theoretical questions in a properly historical light. The word sits uneasily alongside the “Prospectus”’s simultaneous embrace of “new modes of critical and utopian thought,” “new emancipatory impulses and new forms of struggle,” precisely because “frameworks” are what such new modes, impulses, and forms of struggle usually direct their energies against. Indeed, Brenkman renounces Marxism because he thinks of it as a framework, a schematic

tendency to see “patterns of human behavior in groups,” and he opts for liberalism because he thinks it is more attuned to action and potentiality: “liberalism postulates individuals in their capacity of action.” Perhaps it is a sign of the distance separating *Social Text* 1 from *Social Text* 100 that thinking of Marxism as a framework, and liberalism as anything but a fantasy, seems out of tune to me. Thanks in part to the kind of thinking *Social Text* helped to put in motion between issue 1 and issue 100, some of us learned Marxism not as a framework but rather as a way to think outside the frame.

“Frame work” originally referred to the product (or “work”) of a machine (or “frame”) composed of parts fitted together, like a loom for weaving or a mold for casting. Ephraim Chambers’s *Cyclopædia; or, An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (1738) explains that the word “frame is more particularly used for a sort of loom, whereon artizans stretch their linens, silks, stuffs &c. to be embroidered, quilted or the like. See EMBROIDERY, TAPESTRY *work* &c.”<sup>1</sup> The 11 May 1812 issue of *The Examiner; a Sunday paper, on politics, domestic economy, and theatricals* asserts that “Frames . . . indisputably lessen the number of workmen,” and G. P. R. James’s *The Woodman; A Romance of the Times of Richard III* (1849) describes “two young girls who sat near with tall frames before them, running the industrious needle in and out.”<sup>2</sup> So in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at least, “frame work” named the interface between commodities and the artisans, workmen, and young girls who made them under conditions of automation, structural unemployment, and child labor that echo into this crisis-ridden, twenty-first-century global economy.

Rather than thinking of Marxism as a framework, then, we could treat *framework* as a term forged in and through capitalist discursive practice, like *primitive accumulation* or *use-value*. The “so-called” (*sogenannte*) in the title “So-called Primitive Accumulation” of part 8, volume 1, of Marx’s *Capital* reminds us of how Marx liked to interpret such terms when they appeared in the familiar plots of the classical political economists. The following passage from “So-called Primitive Accumulation” exemplifies what we might call the analytic of the so-called, which is more traditionally known by Marxists as the critique of the form of appearance:

This primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology. Adam bit the apple, and thereupon sin fell on the human race. Its origin is supposed to be explained when it is told as an anecdote about the past. Long, long ago there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent and above all frugal élite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living. The legend of theological original sin tells us certainly how man came to be condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow; but the history of economic original sin reveals to us that there are people to whom this is by no means essential.

Never mind! Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort finally had nothing to sell except their own skins. And from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority who, despite all their labour, have up to now nothing to sell but themselves, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly, although they have long ceased to work.<sup>3</sup>

In the face of pervasive, over-familiar terms that one cannot not utter, terms that utter us as much as we utter them, Marx had a method: inhabit in order to know, perform in order to critique, and parody in order to revolutionize.

What happens when we turn this analytic of the so-called on *framework* itself? Frameworks are said to help us know and act by bringing everything together more efficiently, more neatly. For instance, the “Prospectus” says that “the Marxist framework seeks to restore . . . history and historical perspective” to the theory of its day, as if the task of thinking were to put everything back in its proper place, as if that proper place were knowable, as if “history” tells us exactly where to look. However, as the 11 May 1812 issue of the *Examiner* points out, frames also automate the work of thinking, “lessening the number of workmen.” From the perspective of the frame in James’s *The Woodman*, it is the needle that is industrious, not the young girls, as if the needle works the girls themselves. So what about the workmen who are “lessened,” pushed outside the frame—how and what do they think? And what are the girls up to while they sit alongside those industrious needles? The so-called of the framework points us toward what happens in and through, but also alongside and outside, the frame.

Grace Lee Boggs, in her 1999/2000 interview with L. Todd Duncan and Katheryne V. Lindberg published in *Social Text* 67 (2001), talks at length about working in an industrial plant during World War II. Of the social and political action that went on among the workers, she says: “There was a tremendous camaraderie. While our hands were busy wiring and soldering, our mouths were yapping away.” Boggs continues: “In *Capital*, Marx contrasts the stage of attraction, when the workforce is expanding, and that of repulsion, when it is shrinking. World War II was a period of tremendous expansion. Blacks, women, intellectuals were coming together in the plant for the first time in great numbers. They would exchange books, go bowling together after work, hold discussions. It was a very lively place.” Inside, alongside, and in apposition to the order and efficiency of the plant’s so-called frame work, wiring and soldering, Boggs and her coworkers kept their mouths from being lessened, automated. They yapped away and went bowling, had discussions and exchanged books—“lazy rascals.” They questioned what Stanley Aronowitz reminded us to question in *Social Text* 24 (1990): “the crucial bourgeois ideology—work as an ethical form of life.” In turn, they raise for us what Aronowitz called the

“most subversive slogan since the nineteenth century,” a frame-busting question if there ever was one: “why work?”

The plot of Marx’s “anecdote about the past” from “So-called Primitive Accumulation” is familiar, with its misguided origins, its featured individuals, its heroes and villains. It is old, it is new, and it is an ordeal, this plot, but apparently someone has to tell it, or else we’ll all start asking what we’re working for, and why we can’t take a break, refuse to work, live riotously. And if we do ask, just like always, we’ll be called “illiberal,” which according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* means “ill-bred, ungentlemanly, unrefined, base, mean, vulgar, rude, sordid” —lazy rascals, yapping away. This plot still tells itself today, as if automated, a frame work, running the industrious keyboard on our computers with confidence and ease, calling us all. So-calling us all.

Malcolm X knew something about this plot, and he also knew something about the analytic of the so-called: “This so-called democracy has failed the Negro. And all these white liberals have definitely failed the Negro. So, where do we go from here? First, we need some friends. We need some new allies. The entire civil-rights struggle needs a new interpretation, a broader interpretation. We need to look at this civil-rights thing from another angle—from the inside as well as from the outside.”<sup>4</sup> This democracy, this liberalism, this civil-rights thing—Malcolm insisted that we could inhabit them and find a way out of them, too. To where? There’s no framework for that. A young Marx had a similar thought, in 1843: “Therefore not one of the so-called rights of man goes beyond egoistic man, man as a member of civil society, namely an individual withdrawn into himself, his private interest and his private desires and separated from the community”;<sup>5</sup> this “political emancipation is certainly a big step forward. It may not be the last form of general human emancipation.”<sup>6</sup> It may not be. But who knows? That’s the social part of this text of Marxism.

Here’s one way to start, though: take a big step backward to *Social Text* 1, where, a few pages after the “Prospectus,” Sylvia Wynter’s essay “Sambos and Minstrels” breaks out of the frame that Marx’s own critique of so-called primitive accumulation left in place: the frame of the so-called primitive. Drawing “attention to that implicit cultural blanchitude which has been central to the social machine of the world system,” Wynter reflected on how slave cultures of the Americas expose “the contradictions of the egalitarian creed.” She thus took “another angle” on the richly theoretical internationalism that fed into *Social Text* at its start: “In constituting another self, another collective identity whose coding and signification moved outside the framework of the dominant ideology, the slaves were involved in a long and sustained counterstruggle.” In a sense, Wynter inaugurates what would become a long *Social Text* counterplot to a certain liberalism’s egalitarian creed and its inevitable imperial articula-

tions, as well as to a certain Marxism's (anti)primitivism and its inevitable imperial articulations, a counterplot told in *Social Text* from the third world, from postcolonial critiques of the third world, from critiques of the postcolonial.

Get in and get out, Malcolm and Marx said. Grace Lee Boggs and Sylvia Wynter, too. Both at once. But don't forget how to get out. There's riotous work to perform. Illiberal living to be lived. Friendships and alliances to create. Yapping to do. Outside of the so-called framework.

## Notes

1. Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopædia; or, An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (London, 1738), 296. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale.

2. G. P. R. James, *The Woodman; A Romance of the Times of Richard III* (London: T. C. Newby, 1849), 13; *The Examiner; a Sunday paper, on politics, domestic economy, and theatricals* (London), 11 May 1812.

3. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1977), 873.

4. Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Merit, 1965), 31.

5. Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Vintage, 1975), 230.

6. *Ibid.*, 221.

# National Allegory

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Brian Larkin

In January 2009, Amitabh Bachchan, the lion of Indian cinema, reacted on his blog to the increasing success of the film *Slumdog Millionaire* with a caution. Tapping into an anxiety about how India is represented abroad, he asserted, “If SM projects India as Third World dirty underbelly developing nation and causes pain and disgust among nationalists and patriots, let it be known that a murky under belly exists and thrives even in the most developed nations.”<sup>1</sup> Bachchan intensified a furious controversy both inside India and abroad over whether the film was a form of “poverty porn,”<sup>2</sup> whether it was Indian or not, and whether its representations showed real problems in India or a stereotype of poverty served up for foreign audiences.

*Slumdog Millionaire* is, perhaps, an ill fit for Fredric Jameson’s argument in *ST* 15 (1986), in “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” that third-world texts operate as national allegories. Based on an Indian novel (*Q&A* by Vikas Swarup), adapted by a British screenwriter (Simon Beaufoy) and British director (Danny Boyle), codirected by an Indian (Loveleen Tandan), financed from Europe, set in India and starring Indians—the film has origins complex enough for many Indians to claim it as *desi* while others disavow it as foreign. It is also not an allegory in Jameson’s sense of private individual stories representing public political events. Yet the controversy itself is deeply Indian as it replays previous conflicts over the circulation of Indian cinema and what constitutes proper representations of India. What these controversies do is sharpen the focus on a dynamic central to the debate between Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad, but relatively neglected in scholarly discussion (see Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” *ST* 17, 1987). Allegory is not always a feature immanent to a text but is something

texts have placed upon them through the act of circulation across cultural difference. Bachchan's reaction to *Slumdog* as a story of a "dirty underbelly developing nation" rather than of the hard life of two children is an example of this. His reading of the film as a national allegory derives not from his experience of the film but from his reaction to its success in the West, and it is only after this movement that the film comes to stand for the nation (and thus become an object of critique). Allegory, in this mode, is not tied to the imagination of writer or director but is derived externally from the movement of the text in and out of different publics. This is particularly the case for successful films and novels such as *Slumdog* whose popularity heightens a dynamic inherent to the process of circulation itself.

In his article on third-world literature, Jameson attempts to lay out theoretical grounds for analyzing non-Western literature and through that to expand the literary canon. The publicity brought by the debate with Ahmad means this aim has been probably more successful than Jameson could have imagined (if not in the way he expected). His argument, famously, is that third-world intellectuals and the texts they produce exhibit an "obsessive return to the national situation" that comes from their position as structurally marginal to the centers of power in the contemporary world. He insists on a sharp cleavage between West and non-West. "Nothing is to be gained," he argues, "by passing over in silence the radical difference of non-canonical texts." This difference emerges from the experience of imperial domination and living in the dark shadow of American hegemony that together lead to the formation of a different, more politicized non-Western intellectual. It is the experience of this marginality, Jameson argues, that accounts for the "obsessive" concern with allegory. Novels that purport to be about private, intimate stories "necessarily project a political dimension in the forms of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society."

Ahmad, of course, rejects the claim of difference and the argument that third-world texts are wholly concerned with national allegories (indeed he rejects the entire category of third-world literature as a theoretical unity). In most societies, he argues, there is a vast diversity of literature in which thematic concerns about the nation-state are either minor or wholly absent. Using the example of nineteenth-century Urdu literature, he argues this body of work betrays a preoccupation with the place of women and the rise of a petite bourgeoisie rather than any sustained discussion of the national question. It is only because Jameson has little access to vernacular literatures and relies on translated works, Ahmad argues, that he comes to conceive of third-world literature solely in terms of its marginality and opposition to "global American postmodernist culture." While Ahmad makes some compelling points, he is curiously unconcerned with the basic

question Jameson raises: what is the relation between cultural forms and nationalism? One can reject Jameson's totalizing summation ("all Third World texts") while still interrogating the close imbrication of nationalism, literature, and film.

As the controversy over *Slumdog* reveals, the allegorical capacity of texts to stand for the nation stems not just from authorial intention but from the movement that looses them from original contexts of production and reception and opens them up to different publics that do not share the same contexts of understanding. While Jameson does not focus on this dynamic, it is central to his theoretical argument about the Western critical reception of non-Western texts. For Jameson, third-world texts come to the Western reader as estranged: "Western readers whose tastes . . . have been formed by our own modernisms" cannot read in the same way as the public for which the text is originally intended. For readers like himself, Jameson argues, the text appears as "already-read." The Westerner recognizes an "Other reader" standing between her and the text, at the same time realizing a "noncoincidence with that Other reader." His argument here rests on a radical form of alterity that is reflexive in that the haunting presence of this second reader is ultimately the recognition of cultural, religious, political, and social difference. Jameson's analysis is grounded in the difficulty of translation across difference, and it is in that precise encounter that the force of national allegory is released.

To return to *Slumdog*, it is as these images circulate outside of India through film festivals and awards events, and as they assume popularity in these arenas, that they come to take on the increasing burden of representing the nation and so intensify the controversy that surrounds the film. In the case of India, this controversy replays earlier ones that frame how *Slumdog* is understood. The most important of these was the fierce reaction to the international success of Satyajit Ray's film *Pather Panchali* (1955). *Pather Panchali* was the first Indian film recognized within the realm of European art cinema and achieved the feat of making cinema acceptable to an Indian intelligentsia notoriously condescending toward Hindi film and of projecting India's artistic achievement to a worldwide critical audience. In her later years as a member of the Indian parliament, Nargis, one of the few Hindi film stars whose reputation matches that of Amitabh Bachchan, accused Ray of exporting Indian backwardness for foreign audiences. Her fear, and that of many nationalists, was that the film would merely confirm Western stereotypes of Indian poverty and deny the possibility of India representing herself as a modern nation, and she argued that Ray was only successful because he catered to the Western desire to see Indian poverty. Indian films should present images of a modern India that, for her, was defined by dams and development (itself a reference to

the dam-building sequence in her most famous film, *Mother India* [1957; dir. Mehboob Khan]).<sup>3</sup>

Accusations that *Pather Panchali* exported poverty had dogged the film from its release, long before Nargis's comments. Even though the film was selected to represent India at Cannes (where it won an award), attacks on the film led the Indian government to pass regulations directing that, in the future, "before any State Government sends films . . . abroad for exhibition, the State Government should ascertain the film's suitability from the point of view of external publicity."<sup>4</sup> The art historian Kajri Jain argues that these nationalist attempts to control representations of India are a secular equivalent to ideas of religious desecration. They exemplify "what filmmakers in particular recognize as the 'proper light' syndrome referring to the way in which certain images . . . are rejected . . . by representatives of the state because they 'do not show India in a proper light.'"<sup>5</sup> In 1959 the Central Board of Film Censors reacted to the success of Ray's film abroad by extending its list of censorable images to include scenes representing "abject, disgusting poverty"<sup>6</sup>—a clear reference to *Pather Panchali* and one that confirms its peculiar status as a film that brought tremendous prestige to India while, at the same time, destabilizing and threatening that prestige. The assertion of government control over this process reveals an awareness that any film shown abroad might come to speak for the nation irrespective of its content or aesthetic form.

When Satyajit Ray made *Pather Panchali* according to the aesthetic norms of European art cinema at the time, it may be the case that he represented the sort of political intellectual Jameson wrote of, one for whom private stories were at the same time public narratives about the state of the nation. But the controversy that surrounded the film and more recently *Slumdog Millionaire* derives from Indian response to the critical success of these films as they traverse the festivals and cinemas of the West. Allegory, in these instances, is something external to the films. A cultural text is not a container of a meaning that lies inside of it waiting for the critic to release it but is already mediated by the process of circulation itself and accrues meaning by virtue of that traffic across difference. The Jameson-Ahmad debate has been mostly discussed in relation to its role in the analysis of postcolonial literature, but it has much to say about the difficulty in analyzing the traffic of cultural forms across national boundaries (see special issues *ST* 31/32, 1992, "Third World and Post-Colonial Issues," and *ST* 78, 2004, "Postcolonial Traces"). At stake is how we understand the specificity and forms of difference that gives rise to different intellectual publics for writers and critics and the dynamics of translation this involves.

## Notes

1. Amitabh Bachchan, "Day 265," BigBlog, 13 January 2009, [bigb.bigadda.com/2009/01/page/12/](http://bigb.bigadda.com/2009/01/page/12/).
2. See, for instance, Alice Miles, "Shocked by Slumdog's Poverty Porn," (London) *Times*, 14 January 2009, [www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/alice\\_miles/article5511650.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/alice_miles/article5511650.ece).
3. D. A. Windsor, "Nargis, Rushdie, and the Real," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 21 (1998): 229–42.
4. Cited in Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 223.
5. Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Commercial Sacred and Libidinal Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 297.
6. Cited in Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 224.