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Gender, Race, and Class

Bridging the Language-Structure Divide

For social historians and historical sociologists working in the interdisciplinary fields of ethnic studies and women's studies, the challenges posed by poststructuralism are neither purely intellectual matters nor disciplinary quibbles. Rather, a concern with "rescuing political economy" from being washed away by the tide of poststructuralism is impelled by larger political commitments that transcend the academy.

Unlike mainstream disciplines, these fields historically have been con-

nected to social movements dedicated to empowering people marginalized by reason of race, class, and/or gender. Poststructuralism has become a thorny issue in these fields: Many social science- and political economy-oriented scholars have come to feel, whether justifiably or not, that these fields are being “taken over” by literary, film, and cultural studies scholars. They connect the new preoccupation with cultural meanings and language with another perceived shift, a turn away from politics. As women’s studies and ethnic studies become institutionalized in the academy, they are becoming detached from their activist roots and from the communities that participated in the struggles to establish these programs in the first place. The turn toward “reading text,” usually in language inaccessible to community people, is seen as contributing to the separation. Inaccessibility may help stake a claim for academic legitimacy while at the same time reassuring the academy that women’s studies and ethnic studies are politically harmless.

Still, many of us recognize that by problematizing the division between the material/structural and representation/meaning, poststructuralism has opened up possibilities for truly interdisciplinary scholarship. For while it is possible that an extreme “language-is-all-there-is” postmodernist position could breed an indifference or hopelessness about the possibility of a politics of liberation, on the whole deconstruction has provided powerful tools for unmasking, if not dismantling, the social power that lies behind what passes for knowledge, truth, and objectivity. At the same time, however, we need to keep in mind that deconstruction’s ability to destabilize categories that do the masking also threatens to dissolve subordinate identities, such as that of women of color, that are the basis for political mobilization for change. Jon Michael Spencer (1993), writing in the *Black Scholar*, has lamented what he calls “the post-modern conspiracy to explode racial identity.” Spencer contends that though race is not an essence, it is nonetheless “a useful metaphor pointing to cultural and historical differences” because it allows for social cohesion among oppressed groups to counter the mythologies and mystifications of the privileged and powerful. As he later told an interviewer: “To relinquish the notion of race—even if it is a cruel hoax—at this point is to relinquish our fortress against the powers and principalities that still try to undermine us” (Wright 1994).

Replying to Spencer, Patricia Hill Collins (1993) noted that in the past

it made sense to assert an oppositional version of blackness to resist a white racism that posed blackness as a master status. However, solidarity was achieved at the cost of excluding the concerns of women and of gays, lesbians and bisexuals, and others who lay outside normative blackness. At the same time, she agrees that much current postmodernist discourse about multiplicity, diversity, and difference is decontextualized, detached from people's lives and from earlier political struggles that opened up space for challenging the center. Unlike Marxism, black nationalism, and even liberal reformism, "post modernist discourse appears to lack a political program and therefore appears to be apolitical" (53). Collins concludes that blacks need to develop their own alternatives that avoid the limitations of a politics of racial solidarity based on exclusion, as well as the dangers of buying into a seemingly apolitical postmodernist intellectual framework.

Addressing this dilemma in the field of legal studies, Angela Harris (1994: 760) notes that critical race theory has a much more specific political aim than the general field of critical legal studies: "Unlike crits whose primary intellectual-political commitment is to criticism itself, race crits hold a dual commitment to antiracist critique and to maintaining the distinctive cultures formed in part by concepts of 'race.'" Thus, she argues, critical race theorists must maintain a dual stance, drawing on a postmodernist skepticism of claims of neutrality and objectivity while simultaneously retaining a modernist faith in "concepts of reason and truth, transcendental subjects and an objective world of things out there: the way it really is."

This dual commitment to "liberation" of people of color/women and to the maintenance of distinct cultures formed by and around race/gender also was the *raison d'être* for the establishment of ethnic studies/women's studies, as distinct from the more general field of cultural studies. If ethnic studies and women's studies are to remain committed to social justice as opposed to critique as an end in itself, they have to remain grounded to some extent in material relations and in modernist concepts and ideals of reason and truth. The future direction of ethnic studies and women's studies—whether they remain committed to antiracist and antisexist politics—depends on whether and how we bridge the current gap between studies of political economy and discourse/language and manage the tension between modernist and postmodernist narratives.

In my current research and writing, I am committed to a critical social

science that inhabits and uses the tension between modernism and postmodernism: one that simultaneously maintains faith in the modernist assumption of an “objective world out there” and adopts the postmodern skepticism about the fixity and certainty of categories such as “people of color.” As I struggle to formulate an integrated analysis of gender, race, and class, I have relied on a historical comparative approach that incorporates political economy while taking advantage of the critical insights made possible by poststructuralism. I use a social constructionist framework, which considers how race, gender, and class are simultaneously constituted in specific locations and historical periods through “racialized” and “gendered” social structure and discourse. I try to inhabit that middle ground between essentialism and antiessentialism by looking at the ways in which race, gender, and class are constituted relationally. Thus, although there are no fixed categories with universal meanings, essences, and associated identities, categories are not completely free-floating: They are positioned, and therefore gain meaning, in relation to other categories.

In my current research on the construction of racialized gender, I examine local and historical variation in meanings of “whiteness,” as designated by the regionally specific terms *Anglo* in the Southwest, *white* in the Southeast, and *haole* in Hawaii. These three terms have related yet different meanings because they were constituted and positioned in relation to varying “others.” Thus, for example, in the Jim Crow South whiteness was constructed in opposition to blackness; white status and identity was defined by whites, literally, as the absence of blackness, as in the prevalent one-drop rule. In plantation-era Hawaii, “haole” was a racial class designation for whites of the owner, manager, and professional classes. The haole stood in contrast to a large, ethnically diverse plantation labor force consisting of Hawaiians, Japanese, Chinese, Filipinos, Portuguese, and several other groups, who were identified as “locals.” Significantly, European groups recruited for plantation labor—Portuguese, Germans, Norwegians, Poles, Russians, and Spanish—were not considered haole as long as they remained on the plantation.

In thinking through how to conceptualize the simultaneity of gender, race, and class, I became aware that they had somewhat separate trajectories in their confrontation with poststructuralism. It appeared that poststructuralism and the linguistic turn hit gender first, then race, and then, finally,

class. I propose that the reason has to do with the fact that gender, race, and class have been conceived differently in terms of their supposed grounding in material “reality.” Given these differences, I wondered if the ways scholars have contended with the social structure and language relationship in one area might help us in rethinking the relation in another area. That is, can the conception of the relation between political economy and cultural forms/language in racial formation help us to rethink the conception of gender or class formation and vice versa?

Sex or gender is the concept that appears most rooted in material reality: bodies, biological reproduction, sexuality. Indeed, feminist scholars created the concept of gender to refer to socially created differences, precisely to free our thinking from the constrictions of naturalness and biological inevitability. It gave us a terminology that enabled us to direct attention toward historical and cultural variability in meanings of womanhood and manhood. The focus thus shifted to gender as cultural, as meanings created by discourse. These moves helped explode various binaries but also called into question the category “woman,” leading to this problem: How does one study women without assuming “woman” as a preexisting category? Further, once one begins exploding dualisms, the distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender becomes suspect: It becomes apparent that any such distinction assumes the prior existence of “something real” out of which social relationships and cultural meanings were elaborated. A variety of poststructuralist feminist critiques (e.g., Butler 1990; Lorber 1994) have attacked the distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender by pointing out that sex itself is culturally enscribed.

Relatively neglected in historical studies until recently was the very important insight that gender can be studied not just as a characteristic of individuals but as an organizing principle of social structure. This concept of gender as a constituent feature of organizations and institutions has been elaborated in the theoretical writings of, among others, R. W. Connell (1993), Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner (1989), and Joan Scott (1986). Approaching gender as an “organizing principle” necessitates a consideration of both material relations and cultural meanings. Gender is constituted in organizations through the deployment of gendered rhetoric, symbols, and images and the simultaneous allocation of resources and power along gender lines. Thus, understanding the persistent gender gap in wages requires

analysis of the division of labor in the household and labor market as well as the cultural valuation of gendered work, such as caring, and the gendered meaning of concepts such as “skill.” Recently, social historians and historical sociologists have begun examining the state as simultaneously constituted by and constituting gender relations and meanings. Much of this work has focused on the welfare state. Linda Gordon (1994), Theda Skocpol (1992), and others have shown how social rights of citizenship have been gendered through rhetoric about dependency and motherhood, which constructs women as requiring charity rather than being entitled to benefits, and through the material linking of entitlements and rights to employment and military service, which disproportionately benefits men.

Scholars of race were slower to abandon a kind of commonsense notion of race as referring to essential differences underlying visible physical markers. This was so even though biologists long ago abjured the “reality” of race, concluding that racial classifications were so arbitrary as to be meaningless. Franz Boas mapped out a position for anthropology in 1910 when he concluded that differences in cultural development among societies were related to favorability of circumstances, not to racial qualities (McKee 1993). Although race was thus exposed as socially created, social historians failed to follow through on the implications of this insight by studying how racial categories and boundaries are created and maintained. Peggy Pascoe (1991) has argued that the lack of a separate term like “gender” made it difficult for historians to think about race as socially constructed. In sociology, liberal scholarship on race took the form of studying race relations—that is, relations among groups that were already constituted as distinct groups. How the categories “black” and “white” were historically constituted was not part of the study. The continued belief in the reality of race is shown in periodic revivals of “race difference” approaches to explaining black subordination, as illustrated in the resuscitation of the race and IQ debate by the best-seller *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray 1994) and responses to it (e.g., Fischer et al. 1996).

One temptation in the face of the seeming recalcitrance of such essentialist conceptions is to declare that race is pure ideology, without any objective referent. However, it is one thing to say that race is not biological datum, but quite another to deny that it is a feature of social structure. A useful attempt to transcend the dichotomy between material/structural

and linguistic/representational approaches is made by Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) in their racial formation model. Omi and Winant assert the need to go beyond seeing race as either an illusion or something objective and fixed. They define race as a “‘decentered’ complex of social meaning constantly being transformed by political struggle.” They argue that racial formation occurs through a linkage between social structure and representation. The linkage is accomplished through racial projects: “A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (56–57). In *Racial Faultlines*, Tomas Almaguer (1994) takes up Omi and Winant’s concepts in his analysis of the history of racialization of Mexicans, Native Americans, Chinese, and Japanese in California. By examining how the groups were constructed and positioned in relation to one another, he uncovers how races were formed by ideological and structural factors within an overall project of white supremacy.

Recent work by historians and legal scholars on the role of the law in producing and reproducing racial ideology, relationships, and categories have also pointed to the linkages between social structure and language/ideology (e.g., C. Harris 1993; Toro 1994; Haney Lopez 1995). Peggy Pascoe (1996), for example, has focused on key court cases involving miscegenation to examine contestation over competing ideologies of race in the early twentieth century. The widely varying interpretations and meanings found in testimony, arguments, and opinions demonstrate the fungibility of race.

Scholars of class have not had the problem of having to overcome biologicistic notions. By definition, class was understood to be social but materially based, rather than ideological, whether in relation to the means of production or to ways of getting income (Turbin 1994). A main focus of labor historians has been how class consciousness/identity and political action grows out of “objective class.” Barbara Fields (1982: 150–51) has claimed that class differs from race in having an objective referent: “Class and race are concepts of a different order; they do not occupy the same analytical space, and thus cannot constitute explanatory alternatives to each other. At its core, class refers to a material circumstance: the inequality of human beings from the standpoint of social power. . . . Of course the objective core of class is always mediated by ideology, which is a refraction of objective reality in human consciousness. . . . But at the same time, the reality of class

can assert itself independently of people's consciousness, and sometimes in direct opposition to it." In contrast to race, which she argues can be located only at the level of "social appearances," class is located primarily at the level of "objective reality."

However, as this readership knows, recent studies of class formation have questioned the primacy of material circumstances and the experience of concrete material conditions—for example, the deskilling of one's job—in the formation and mobilization of class consciousness. Rather, class consciousness, when it has arisen, has drawn on the available vocabulary, symbols, and rhetoric of class. In the nineteenth century, white male working-class identity was valorized and a "family wage" claimed on the basis of conceptions of manhood, family headship, and skill. The importance of cultural meanings, of course, does not negate the relevance of material circumstances—only the idea that an understanding of "objective" conditions is sufficient. Also, as Sonya Rose (1995) has argued, the problem with standard labor history's accounts of class formation may be not the over-stressing of political economy but the use of a partial or distorted notion of what constitutes political economy (e.g., seeing it as encompassing only relations at the point of production). An important idea that emerges from these studies of class formation is the mediating role that struggle plays in linking experiences of material conditions with cultural meanings. Thus, it is in the process of engaging with or resisting material forces that people articulate and rearticulate available symbols to make sense of their material circumstance and to make claims to resources and rights. In commenting on his own comfort with the linguistic turn in social history, William Sewell (1993) reminds us that the dichotomy between material and ideal realms is *itself a socially constructed idea*; he argues that in any social formation they are inseparable and that neither can therefore be more fundamental than the other. Consciousness and political organizing cannot occur without both.

Conclusion

I have suggested that within the separate scholarship on gender, race, or class, specific concepts have emerged that have been useful in bridging the structure and language divide: the idea of gender as a constituent feature of institutions and organizations, the idea of racial formation through projects

in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized, and the idea of class struggle as mediating material conditions and culturally available language and symbols. Each of these ideas can be applied to analyze the other axes of “difference” as well as to study their mutual interlocking construction. Thus, race and class, as well as gender, can be seen as constituting and being constituted by the state and other social institutions. Similarly, the idea of racial projects can be extended to consider the interlinking of race, gender, and class projects through the representation and organization of bodies. Finally, the idea of struggle, which has been most often applied to understanding the formation of class consciousness, can be useful in thinking about the role of contestation or engagement in mediating material conditions and cultural representation in race and gender formations. More generally, thinking about the relation between political economy and language in the areas of gender, race, and class may help clarify the epistemological standing of these concepts and their relation to one another.

Note

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