

RESPONSE TO CONTROVERSY

A Reply to Criticism

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The three critiques of “On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History” (*JLWCH*, spring 1987) fall into two categories: Bryan Palmer and Christine Stansell share a fundamental disagreement with my emphasis on “language,” arguing instead that material reality, social experiences, real or concrete events are the stuff of social history, while “language” is ephemeral, epiphenomenal, an “idealist” preoccupation. Andy Rabinbach endorses and expands on my analysis, pointing up some rigidities of argumentation and the interpretive pitfalls of overly formalized distinctions. For him “language” holds no terror or implication of betrayal of the “real” subject of politically correct history (“woman” for Stansell, “the working class” for Palmer). Rather, he accepts the notion that there is no transparent “real” that exists apart from conceptualization and that complex analysis of how meaning is made might have (politically) useful payoffs. Since the two positions are worlds apart, it seems most efficient to deal with each in turn.

The Horse’s Nostril School of Social History

Bryan Palmer’s dramatic opening scene is meant to persuade his readers that there is a reality so compelling, an oppression so vivid, a force so naked that we need never doubt our perceptions of what they mean. Not only that, they transcend the limits of historical context; their meaning is apparent whatever the time or place: “Looking up into the flared nostrils of the state’s steed reminds me of a similar view I ‘experienced’ fifteen years ago at a May Day anti-imperialist rally in Washington.” Here Palmer makes certain to remind us that *his* credentials are impeccable as a political activist and hence as a social historian. By putting experience in quotation marks, he also ridicules my suggestion that experience may be a problematic concept. In his presentation of it, the meaning of an event is inherent in the event itself. Experience is thus a direct, unmediated sensation; the experience of class struggle is directly knowable except to those with false consciousness or perhaps none at all. In Palmer’s little scenario, direct confrontation with the repressive forces of the

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state makes it impossible for him to interview an imaginary woman he has been pursuing in the crowd: "No discourse today! The class struggle has intervened. . . ."

I find myself astonished at that statement because it so willfully refuses even to engage seriously the argument I tried to make. The opposition discourse versus class struggle is one I cannot accept, for class struggle is produced in discourse. By discourse I do not mean utterances, or "words" (as Stansell repeatedly redefines "language"), but whole ways of thinking, of understanding how the world operates and what one's place is in it. And not only ways of thinking, but ways of organizing lives, institutions, societies, ways of implementing and justifying inequalities, but also of refusing them. I use the notion of discourse in its Foucauldian sense, for it seems to me a fruitful way to analyze the workings of power ideationally *and* institutionally without designating one or the other as primary or prior or a first cause.

Indeed, it seems to me impossible to separate meanings from experiences, "language" from "real" life; rather "language" is inextricably connected, an integral part of life. There is no social experience apart from people's perception of it; life consists of "language" as much as work or childbirth or "strategies of subsistence" or political rallies. Moreover, "language" is not an entity that can only be analyzed separately; it is, instead, what makes childbirth or strategies of subsistence or political rallies intelligible; it is what enables people to communicate with one another, to distinguish among themselves, to identify with some and not with others, to form collectivities. "Language" not only enables social practice; it *is* social practice. For that reason it is absurd to posit, as Stansell does, an antithesis between a "rhetorical text" (what text is without rhetoric?) and "social experience." In doing so she (not I) brings about an "impoverishment of the interpretative field," for she renders "text" to mean, literally, a written document. I would argue against that reductionism that a "text" is anything that can be "read"—that is interpreted—including actions, organizations, institutions, behaviors. All of those produce and are produced in language; they are at once concepts *and* practices and need to be analyzed simultaneously as such.

The notion of discourse I use seeks to break down the opposition between concept and practice, words and things, language and reality. I would argue instead that there is a deep connection between how relationships are represented and how they are implemented. Thus, to say that "the working class family was created within working-class discourse" is not to say that "words" alone brought families into being. It is to indicate the inseparability of concepts of the family (and of class) from relationships actually established. Family organization appealed to norms, values, deeply held beliefs about what was right and wrong, how men and women ought to behave, who held authority, etc. Even if this did not entail self-conscious reflection, it did not mean that

families had no “language,” that action did not take place within a “discursive” frame. Indeed, the power of discourse—and its fascination for the historian—is that it can acquire a kind of axiomatic or hegemonic status that is difficult to challenge or question. Precisely because concepts are constructed and legitimated in terms of “natural facts” or transcendent “truths” or “common sense,” they establish an authority that is difficult to question or dislodge. That has surely been the case for gender in, for example, eighteenth and nineteenth-century political discourses, including those of class and class struggle.

It is for that reason that analyses of “language” or discourse are particularly useful for thinking about gender. I do not want to rehearse my entire argument here, but (since it seems to have gone largely unheard by these critics) I will repeat the central points: concepts like class are required before individuals can identify themselves as members of such a group, before they can act collectively as such. Concepts of all kinds are created through contrasts and oppositions. Historically, gender always provides various ways of thinking about difference. If we look closely at the “languages of class” of the nineteenth century political discourses, including those of class and class struggle. Sexual difference is invoked as a “natural” phenomenon, as such it enjoys a privileged status, seemingly outside question or criticism. Those who do criticize (and there were those who did) have a difficult time challenging its authority for they seem to be disputing nature instead of social construction. Gender certainly comes to be so implicated in concepts of class that there is no way to analyze one without the other. One cannot analyze politics separately from gender, sexuality, the family. These are not compartments of life, but integrally related systems; “language” makes possible the study of their interrelationships. As Chartists set forth their program they offered the terms of political collective identity. This identity rested on a set of differentiations—inclusions and exclusions, comparisons and contrasts—that relied on sexual difference for their meaning. Had Stedman Jones attended to languages of difference he would have seen *how* the particular notion of class developed by this group was understood, and he would have seen gender as well. By failing to attend to how “language” rests on differentiation, he missed both class and gender in their specific manifestation in Chartism.

The brunt of my argument was about gender. Palmer and Stansell have chosen to focus almost exclusively on “language.” I find that curious. Palmer refuses my critique of labor historians who have neglected the issue of gender, yet he illustrates my point. Most of his critique is directed at Stedman Jones, not me, and little of it has to do with either women or gender. Rhetorically, he is pious in the extreme about how hard he and others are trying to include women in the story of the labor movement, but his opening scenario also shows the limits of his effort. In that drama, we find a standard device of a certain socialist appeal that illustrates the brutality of oppression by raising the

spectre of (innocent, vulnerable) womanhood crushed beneath enemy forces (or in this case feeling the hot breath exhaled through the nostrils of the “state’s steed”). Unconsciously (or unreflectively) Palmer reinscribes a gendered relationship (vulnerable women needing protection by the politically organized men of their class) some of us would like to challenge. A good way to challenge it is to be attentive to the ways in which “language” is used not only to convey literal themes, but to construct the authority of definitions, the implicit meanings of concepts.

Stansell’s criticism takes on gender briefly, arguing that attention to gender runs the risk of obscuring “woman, the subject.” I presume this is meant to be a political point, but it is not one I can accept for it separates theory and practice to the detriment of both. I would argue against Stansell that “woman, the subject” can only be understood as she is constructed and constructs herself, differentially, in relation to others, men in particular. That is what gender is all about. The terms of the relationship are constantly renegotiated and reformulated—concepts of class are one way that happens. Historians can’t write the history of women without writing the history of gender, even if they don’t use the word. To write the history of gender is not to leave women out, as Stansell suggests; it is to provide an analytic frame that insists that the meanings of “men” and “women” are always secured in terms of one another. Nor is it to deny women agency; it is only to insist that how women perceive themselves, how they act, must be understood in broad and complex cultural terms. One could, I suppose, posit that women arrive at their identities all by themselves, through an “experience” unmediated by cultural concepts. That seems to me always to end up in essentialism, because the body becomes the (only) common point of origin for shared femininity. Another option would be to posit gender as a fixed, unchanging relationship between the sexes that comes into play differently in different circumstances through the attribution of different “roles.” That, too, runs into a dead end, because gender itself becomes a merely superstructural reflection of other relationships deemed determining or more important—relationships such as class, politics, state or economic formations. Such an approach foregoes the opportunity to analyze profoundly interconnected processes, to genuinely historicize gender, to install women, families, sexuality into what has up until now remained the restrictively “political” chronicle of working-class formation. Indeed, I thought that such an installation was the project of Chris Stansell’s recent book. I am thus doubly baffled by her warnings about gender.

There is another aspect of these two critiques I find dismaying and that is their preference for gestural over serious argumentation. Neither Palmer nor Stansell take on difficult philosophical questions; instead they refuse them by calling my motives into question. Palmer charges me with the sins of abstraction and formalism as well as with trying to dictate feminism to “those on the left . . . [who] have the right to cast their lot with class. . . .” He says I do a

“severe disservice to those many women who have argued with us in our classes and produced the kinds of work that have enriched our understanding. . . .” (Here I refrain from comment on the gendered division of labor presented in this revealing formulation.) But above all, he implies that I have deviated from the (only correct) position contained in Marx’s conceptions of dialectical and historical materialism. My answer to these charges is, first, that there is more to Marx, greater complexity in his materialism, than Palmer’s crude invocation of it. Second, the test of political correctness is a bad one to impose on intellectual work for in the end it only defeats the possibilities of innovative politics. That we need such politics—as feminists and socialists—at this moment seems to me beyond doubt.

Stansell’s posture is more puzzling because she endorses my feminist agenda and, in all her work, pushes toward theoretical reformulations. Yet she dismisses my serious efforts to engage in theoretical discussion by charging that I have chosen to dance to faddish French tunes rather than to do the less glittery, but more serious work of a seemingly positivist history:

While we doggedly truck and barter our empirical goods, the critics sport about in the fields of cosmopolitan debate, tossing glamorous French names to and fro, plying intellectual arabesques, making graceful play of ponderous philosophical speculation. Much of this self-conscious urbanity is pretentious and self-inflating, and the abstruse jargon often masks the most elementary of points.

Scott . . . seems to pay more attention to the superior sensibilities of the literati . . . than to why we, her dull but worthy colleagues, take such offense at their imperious ways.

These formulations make what ought to be serious philosophical debate a matter of taste and style. “To my mind,” writes Stansell, “Scott is not sufficiently mindful of the historians’ dislike of the overdetermining role which post-structuralists assign to language.” “Dislike?” What are the intellectual objections? Apart from a misreading of “language theory” as “overdetermining” or formally idealist, Stansell does not really confront the problem. It seems to me that to dismiss post-structuralist theory as too difficult or too cosmopolitan is to forfeit an opportunity for serious debate, a chance to think through some of the most troubling questions feminists have formulated in recent years. This is not to say that one need accept all of its premises; only to suggest that serious readings of philosophers like Foucault might point to ways out of otherwise impossible theoretical tangles. Why is it that Marx—also an extremely difficult read if one reads him at all—is now so comfortable, while more recent thinkers are too hard? Difficulty, we all tell our students, is no reason to reject out of hand a text, an assignment, or, for that matter, a dissenting political stand.

Rationalism and Utopia

I have little to say about Andy Rabinbach's critique except to recommend it to my readers for its clarity of exposition. I do want, however, to respond briefly to some of his critical points. I don't think the languages of rationalism and utopian communitarianism were "radically different from each other." Indeed, I agree that they were "mutually constitutive," part of the same political discourse. Yet I would argue, against Rabinbach, that gender figured centrally in that mutual constitution. As rationalists and utopians staked out political ground, they constructed their philosophies and their views of one another using gender. Thus, rationalists reduced the complexity of Locke, as Rabinbach rightly points out, to a narrower reading that more decisively associated labor and masculinity. In the context of a struggle for political terrain, they wrote utopianism out of theoretical consideration by associating it with irrational, spiritual (feminine) manifestations—untenable for the sober working man's political agenda. On their side, the utopians played with gender in an attempt to rethink hierarchy and difference. Their elevation of the feminine to a position of prominence, if not always equality with the masculine, was sometimes a way to criticize competitive capitalism, but also a way to reject strictly rationalist politics. (I never said utopians "present us with a degendered language," or that difference was absent from their concepts. Their language of gender was simply different from that of other political groups, some of it deliberately defined in opposition to the very movements whose goals they shared.) There is no doubt that the play of "language" was complicated and that gender was employed everywhere and not always consistently. Still, it seems to me that one finds distinctions made between rationalists and utopians that rest on the binary opposition masculine/feminine.

As for the appeal of rationalism and universalism, I think Rabinbach oversimplifies in order to hold out some possibility for the humanist project. The languages of rationality or universalism may, of course, be extended to women, but historically the problem of difference has never been solved by this move. As long as Man embodies the human, Woman is only a specific instance of that human, and the particularity of her being places her lower, subsumes her, in hierarchies of status. Although it is true that Lockean notions of property in labor could be extended to women and were indeed claimed by feminists against discrimination, concepts of labor have proved notoriously resistant to these claims. In the nineteenth century, women were viewed as "imperfect" workers, necessarily less productive than men, by political economists, employers, and labor leaders. Given the power of these voices, it was hard for feminists to gain a hearing for their dissent from these ideas. The discourse on women workers does not bear out Rabinbach's optimistic reading of the logical possibilities of Lockean notions of natural rights. Indeed, it is telling from this perspective that when women made successful claims about pro-

perty in labor, it was the (special and different) labor of maternity they invoked.

Nineteenth-century “languages of class” were complicated and variable; they were neither homogeneous nor susceptible entirely to hegemonic control. They were, nonetheless, indisputably gendered, resting as they did on visions of sexual difference, however varied those visions were. We cannot understand how concepts of class acquired legitimacy and established political movements without examining concepts of gender. We cannot understand working-class sexual divisions of labor without interrogating concepts of class. There is no choice, as Bryan Palmer insists there is, between a focus on class or gender; each is necessarily incomplete without the other. There is no choice, as Christine Stansell suggests there ought to be, between gender and “woman,” unless we want to acknowledge the irrelevance of the history of women for the history of class. The link between gender and class is conceptual; it is a link every bit as material as the link between productive forces and relations of production. To study its history requires attention to “language” and a willingness to subject the very idea of the working class to historical scrutiny. As Andy Rabinbach suggests, this requires that labor historians relinquish their attachments to teleology and acquire instead the analytic skills that Foucault (echoing Nietzsche) called genealogy.