

# CLASS DIFFERENCE AND INDIFFERENCE IN FEMINIST MEDIA STUDIES

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## Abstract

This essay argues that the alliance between feminist media studies and cultural studies has encouraged many feminists to keep a critical distance from the important area of political-economic critique of culture. In addressing issues of social class, feminist media scholars have tended to treat the category as an irrelevant addendum to the gender-race-class trilogy, to undertheorise class, or to treat it as synonymous with social status. This essay contends that indifference to class and the treatment of class as a category that can be read off of a text or an audience fails to realise that class is only meaningful as a relationship of antagonism between different classes at the site of forces and relations of production. The result is that little attention is paid to how forms of patriarchy, women's lives and cultural practices are incorporated into and structured by the capitalist mode of production.

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The exponential growth of feminist scholarship for more than a decade has ensured its representation in various forms throughout the entire field of media studies. Yet, one of the aims of this essay is to argue that the expansion of feminist media scholarship has been accompanied by a narrowing of scope, at least in the case of its most publicly perceptible forms, expressed predominantly through the privileged institutional sites of Anglophone countries. I refer to the alliance between feminist media studies and cultural studies. As I suggest in this essay, this co-dependence has not been an altogether healthy development. Rather, it has encouraged many feminists to keep a critical distance from the important area of political economy, a place from which one may question relations between culture and the experience of social class.

Cultural studies approaches have not been inherited or borrowed by feminists; rather, these scholars have actively participated in the development of the field. We could just as easily speak, as Hall (1980, 38) does, of the impact of feminism on cultural studies, rather than vice versa. In speaking of the “emergence of feminism within the Centre’s work,” he observes that feminism radically altered the terrain of cultural studies, discovering new concrete areas of inquiry, rethinking the Marxist concept of “production” and reshaping existing areas of inquiry. Hall contends that the larger impact of feminism “has been theoretical and organisational — all that has been required to think the whole field anew from the site of a different contradiction and all that this has meant, in its consequences, both for what is studied in the Centre and how it is studied: the organization of a new intellectual practice” (1980, 38). This, of course, did not occur without a struggle, much of it around the ethnographic material used as evidence of the relationship between dominant culture and subordinate (male working class) groups (Franklin, Lury, and Stacey 1991, 11). Even the most sharply critical reviews of British cultural studies, most notably David Harris’s *From Class Struggle to the Politics of Pleasure* (1992), hail the influence of feminism as one of the most important political developments in the field. Feminist interventions and challenges to male-oriented models and assumptions, have, in short, been critical to the evolution of the field of cultural studies, providing a concerted challenge to many of its gender-biased practices, particularly within ethnographic studies.

After feminism’s early ruptural appearance within cultural studies, the fields grew symbiotically, assimilating one another’s insights and reinforcing one another’s tendencies to push each insight to an extreme. For many Left critics and feminists, the key insight is that an elitist scholarly approach decrying ideological manipulation is ill-served for advancing a politics of the marginalised. Instead, they turn to the cultural analysis of everyday life, which offered a surge of hope, as an alternative to the bleakness perceived in Frankfurt School mass culture theses, the impracticability perceived in the revolutionary objectives of Marxism, and the functionalism of traditional American media scholarship. The cultural analysis of everyday life promised to open up the category of struggle, beyond “official-political” and economic struggle, to account for specific audience responses to mass culture. The work of British cultural studies, in particular, focuses on questions of resistance, popular pleasures, and plurality of meaning, attending to the concrete everyday lives of people in relation to social control and struggle and offering an optimistic account of how marginalised people resist social control through their interpretive activities.

The new left scholars overcompensate for traditional Marxism’s determinism and neglect of cultural experience, however, by affirming and valorising the resistant ca-

pacities of “ordinary” people while largely ignoring the structural constraints imposed by political and economic realities. In pursuing the insight that the personal is political, and by couching these politics in a nebulous context called power relations, cultural studies and its feminist variants begin to lose sight of the sense and specificity of both politics and power. Power and politics appear everywhere — and, therefore, nowhere. Jameson (1993, 44-45) suggests that “power” is a dangerous and intoxicating slogan for intellectuals, one whose interpretations must come in the form of demystifications and de-idealizations. Moreover, and with significance for this analysis, he suggests that cultural studies’ rhetoric of power is, in fact, a repudiation of economic analysis, “an anti-Marxist move, designed to replace analysis in terms of the mode of production” (1993, 45-46).

The replacement of the mode of production by relations of power is accompanied by a rejection and disregard for class experience. In place of old, modernist concepts such as “class” and “reason,” we now have new, postmodern concepts such as “groups” and “affect.” Groups are united in difference, rather than economic exploitation. Murdock (1995, 91) observes that although class was central to the founding moment of the field of cultural studies, it “has become a category that dare not speak its name.” I would suggest, however, that class has spoken its name regularly within feminist cultural studies over the last decade, in a hushed voice, as the tacked-on, tertiary term in the “holy trinity” of gender, race and class. While the history of the development of feminist cultural studies of the media reveals a keen discomfort with Marxism and its emphasis on class, few feminists would suggest that a nod to class is irrelevant or damaging to this scholarship. Instead, the category is often treated as a kind of irrelevant addendum, the difference that makes no difference, at least within the parameters of feminist media studies. This indifference amounts to a fundamental evasion of the realities of class relations under capitalism, where forms of patriarchy, women’s lives, and cultural practices of all kinds are incorporated into and structured by the capitalist mode of production, whether in the realm of wage labour, the domestic economy, reproduction, private property, or commodification.

## Wrestling With Marxism

There is only a kernel of truth to cultural studies critics’ common complaint that the field’s predominant European form, described broadly as “British cultural studies,” lost its Marxist leanings as it became institutionalised in the United States in the nineteen-eighties. This blanket statement fails to observe a number of specific factors involved in the inception and evolution of contemporary cultural studies. What is most apparently ignored is that British cultural studies was never comfortable with Marxism. As Hall (1992, 279) suggests, the relationship between cultural studies and Marxism was always more antagonistic than conciliatory: British cultural studies developed out of the perceived inadequacies and evasions of Marxism. Grossberg (1995, 77) effectively summarises the relationship: “Both cultural studies and the New Left, with which many of its leading figures were affiliated, distanced themselves from Marxism and its various models of culture, even while they operated within the space it opened.”

Although it retains its Marxist connections, British cultural studies’ provocation was the perceived reductiveness of the base/superstructure model and the elitist pessimism thought to have permeated the mass-culture criticism and to have contrib-

uted to political paralysis within the Frankfurt School tradition. Both unorthodox Althusserian structuralism and the Gramscian notion of hegemony are readily apparent as influences in British cultural studies scholars' turn from traditional Marxist theoretical perspectives. Although British cultural studies shares with traditional perspectives the notion that the power of the media is ideological, ideology is conceptualised differently, around both the audience's insertion into cultural textuality and structural analyses of signifying systems of the media (Curran, Gurevitch, and Woollacott 1982; Hall 1980; Grossberg 1984). The scholars directed their attention toward the study of subcultures, subcultural styles, and the contradictions experienced in the everyday lives of members of subcultures, most of whom were working class. One of the early observations of researchers at the Centre is that, if subcultures could appropriate cultural practices into their own constructed style, then cultural studies work must begin by acknowledging that texts can be read and used in different ways. The study of popular culture, they argued, should direct attention to the signifying practices that produce sites of social identity within a specific context and the gaps within this signifying network that may allow for resistance to dominant ideology (Lipsitz 1990). The question then becomes that of identifying the relations and the possibilities for struggling against the interests of the existing structures of domination (Grossberg, 1984, 402-403).

After the early work of Hoggart, Williams and Thompson, which focused upon class relations as primary in the organisation of British society, the history of British cultural studies is marked by its increasing distance from Marxist analysis of class structures. The Gramscian culturalist influence increasingly took precedence over the Althusserian structuralist influence. As Hall (1992, 281) describes, although Gramsci belongs to the problematic of Marxism, his importance to cultural studies in the seventies was in "the degree to which he radically displaced some of the inheritances of Marxism in cultural studies." Cultural studies practitioners who were uncomfortable with Marx's orthodoxy, doctrinal character, determinism, reductionism, economism, and belief in false consciousness could, via Gramsci, pursue the analysis of class relations through questions of culture and hegemony.

One question confronted by Hall, Morley and other researchers at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was that of the relationship between encoding (the textual inscription of dominant ideology) and decoding (audience activity). Over time, and with the development of ethnographic criticism, the scales tipped in favour of the latter. Ethnographic critics reacted against structuralist and post-structuralist, Lacanian and Althusserian, theories that looked upon the media as a closed system with an ideological power that both constructed the subjects for the text and defined what could be thought by them. This work, associated with nineteen-seventies work in the film journal *Screen*, was anchored in psychoanalytic textual analysis, which described the way subjects are "inscribed" in and "constructed" by popular film texts. Hobson's (1982) study of women audience members for the British soap opera "Crossroads" represents an influential early study which rejected *Screen* theory and, instead, attempted to understand how female audience members related the television program to their own experiences.

Scholars began to take up questions regarding gender, race, youth culture and imperialism, which, to be sure, did not have to be separated from class analysis, as suggested by Willis's (1978) research on working class resistance and Hebdige's (1979; 1988) work on subcultures and style. These analyses were challenged by feminists,

notably Angela McRobbie, who exposed their emphasis on masculine forms of resistance and lack of acknowledgement of the patriarchal elements at work in these forms of resistance. McRobbie's (1978a; 1978b; 1980; 1982; 1984) studies of working-class "girl culture," through which she challenges the primacy of class considerations, has had an enormous impact on cultural studies, and for feminists in particular, as one of the first of many responses to the masculinist bias of British cultural studies.

A number of turns in British cultural studies — the analysis of "groups" and "communities," the discomfort with the "dominant ideology" thesis, the ethnographic focus on consumption, and the increasing embrace of consumer culture — displaced an inquiry into class relations, mode of production, and the structural aspects of capitalism. Left politics were preserved in a neo-Gramscian move, in which readers and texts were pre-defined in Marxist terminology that prescribed "struggle," "resistance," "challenges," "contestations," "contradictions" and so on. Sholle (1990, 97) observes that, as cultural studies proceeded, it continued to gesture toward a complex view of the activities of the reader; yet, in its application, "it reduces the tensions surrounding questions of class consciousness, the text and relations of power to simple dichotomies between determined producers and intentional consumers, between passive and active responses, and between dominant-elite and dominated audience." The text is conceptualised as a hegemonic site of struggle containing both the forces of domination and the opportunities to resist such forces from subordinate positions. Meanwhile, in a move that would please Big Brother, the act of material consumption becomes an act of cultural production, a tactical raid upon the system. As Fiske (1989) suggests, the people "make do" with commodities by putting them to creative use.

All of this is grist for the American — and neoliberal — mill. By the time that British cultural studies, with its increasingly populist character, began to take hold in the United States in the nineteen-eighties, it had on offer a set of progressive politics that fit well within the American context. The dominant form of the public sphere, if one could be said to have ever existed in the United States, had long approximated Habermas's (1989) "culture-consuming public," rather than the more specifically classed, bourgeois, "culture-debating public" that existed within the European historical memory. Moreover, the American myth of classlessness, expressed through the ascendancy of the notion of a huge middle-class, did not offer the clarity and specificity of British class relations. Class relations in the United States, however, were distinguished by how effectively they were hidden from view. "American Dream" and "melting pot" ideologies were advanced through family, workplace, education, and church. Modernisation theories, which have been hegemonic in North American social sciences and state policy since the nineteen-fifties, contribute the view that the "melting pot" would make obsolete the differences and conflicts of class, race, ethnicity, and nation (if not gender). The market and liberal-democratic institutions of a broadly "middle class" consumer society would be the vehicle for eroding these divisions, and, at the same time, for triumphing over communism (McCaughan 1993, 82).

That the notion of the middle-class belongs more to the "superstructure" than the "base" of capitalism in the United States seems undeniable. In April of 1995, the Federal Reserve released data indicating that the richest one percent of United States households own forty percent of the country's wealth. Yet, many Americans continue to believe in the trickle-down theory of capital and others react by casting their votes in support of conservative platforms touting school prayer and "family values." Al-

though the United States enjoys a status as the most powerful country in the world, its citizens do not share this power, as their constitutional “guarantees” are small match for military prowess, corporate wealth, and scientific and technological advancement.

Neoliberalism and free enterprise, which are secured in and by the United States in its status as a political and economic superpower, have taken their toll on all societies subject to the laws of the market, and on many critical scholars as well. A conception of the sovereign consumer, making choices in the free market, is key to the process of legitimation of the neoliberal conception of society, and, as it turns out, to the process of legitimation of the neopopulist orientation of cultural studies (Mattelart 1994, 234). The interests of the free market and cultural studies are linked through the reaffirmation of the consumer. As Mattelart (1994, 234) observes:

*Hostage and alibi, this consumer has, indeed, the starring role on the stage of the democratic marketplace; he or she is a “citizen” of it. The discourse built around the consumer, a consumer free of all attachments and determinations other than his or her own will, claims such authority that it often becomes a totalizing discourse, one leaving no place for other issues than those related to consumption. Consumption is assumed to contain within itself its own explanation and raison d’être. [...] In an age when the theme of reception is quite widespread, so frequent are the efforts to make us believe that the return to the consumer is necessarily interesting in itself and constitutes a fundamental break with the past, that one often forgets to question the reasons for the evolution of these approaches and the origin of their diversity.*

The totalising discourse around consumers and consumption is ironic, to say the least, in the face of the postmodernist turn in cultural studies, which eschews Marxism and other modernist, “grand theories” as totalising.

## “Dual Systems” Feminism

Among feminists, the separation of patriarchy from capitalism recapitulated the division between cultural studies and Marxism. Once cultural studies developed in the direction of the consumer of popular culture, its affinity with feminist media studies was secured. Women’s centrality to consumer culture represents an important link between feminist inquiry and cultural studies. Moreover, one prevailing object of cultural studies matches that of many feminist projects — to publicise and politicise the activities of subcultural groups or communities whose “private” activities have been culturally, socially, and historically devalued. In the case of feminist media studies, these subcultures are the audiences for “feminine” cultural forms such as soap operas, romance novels, and melodramas.

Radway’s (1984) study of readers of romance novels, although uninformed by the work in British cultural studies, reacted similarly against mass-culture textual criticism. Her book, *Reading the Romance*, an enormously influential work for feminist cultural studies, rejects the notion of a passive reader, arguing that romance readers actively make sense of their own experience of reading and that they share similar experiences and have similar interpretive orientations. Reading enabled the women to refuse other-directed roles because, in picking up the books in the first place, the women refused their families’ demands. The act was compensatory because it allowed them to carve out a solitary space of self-interest. Still, Radway concedes that romance reading left the domestic role of women in patriarchal culture virtually intact. The

women did not challenge the system of social relations, but instead, made incremental demands, such as the right to be alone or to spend money on romances.

That Radway's study fails to investigate the class positions of romance readers is not surprising. The focus on patriarchy is obviated by the study's feminist politics. But, the severance of patriarchy from capitalism, accompanied by an indifference to class, was well underway among feminists in the nineteen-eighties. By the early nineteen-seventies, many women's movements were becoming estranged from left organisations, which they accused of masculine bias. Socialist-feminists were in the minority, and those who wanted to participate in left and feminist causes were often asked to choose between causes (Echols 1989, 136). More separatist, radical feminists began to redefine the women's movement. The Marxist "woman question" became an embattled political and theoretical site of contention between the often divergent goals of feminism and Marxism. Many feminists object to "the woman question" as a misguided, patriarchal attempt to align the interests of men and women within the context of relations of production. Hartmann (1981, p. 3), in her influential essay, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism," argued that "the woman question" has never been "the feminist question," which is, instead, directed at understanding men's dominance over women. "The feminist question" described by Hartmann and others located patriarchy and capitalism as separate struggles with separate mechanisms ("dual systems") while "the woman question" located women's oppression within the interests of capital ("unified systems"). In the collection *Women and Revolution* (Sargent 1981) and elsewhere, feminists charged that neither Marx nor Engels responded adequately to women's specific relation to workplace production and the social reproduction involved in household maintenance and child-bearing and -rearing. A few feminists, notably Vogel and Young in the collection cited, suggested that the dual systems approach erred in creating a gendered division of labour between Marxism and feminism and their respective concerns with capitalism and male dominance. This approach, ironically, proposed a "marriage" in which Marxism takes care of the public world of economics and feminism takes care of the private world of family, reproduction and sexuality, thus reinforcing the dominant ideological construction of the public/private dichotomy.

While it is not at all clear whether many feminist media scholars nominally subscribe to a dual systems or a unified systems approach, the former is followed most often in practice. Patriarchy is the central and only antagonism described in almost every study since the inception of feminist media scholarship in the United States. Moreover, the predominant conception of patriarchy is most often, exclusively and transhistorically, located in the family system, as private patriarchy, despite patriarchy's increasingly public management by the state in the interest of the economy (Brown 1980; Fraser 1989). On the other hand, given cultural studies' adoration of the active audience and discomfort with dominant ideology, a number of feminist critics seem almost as uncomfortable with the totalising language of patriarchy as they are with that of Marxist theory. The "fan" has become a convenient vehicle for avoiding totalising logics. In fact, as Jameson points out, cultural studies introduced a new model of the intellectual as a "fan of fans" (1993, 42). An entire cottage industry has been formed around fans' recognition of pop singer Madonna's ability to slip through the noose of patriarchy. Lewis (1990, 158) describes the ability of female rock music fans to recount textual and extra-textual knowledge about their favourite stars as "an awe-inspiring

event" and "a mark of status." (1990, 158) Moreover, she contends that the production of goods for commodity transactions with the fan market "becomes a kind of production **by** the fan as merchandisers take their lead from fan commitments and popularity" (1990, 160). For Lewis, then, the use of the fan consumer for commercial gains is balanced by the market's responsiveness to the fan. That fans do not have any real access to industrial-commercial production is of little consequence; what is important, rather, is that fans **feel empowered**, as though they have some ownership in the production of stars and the successes of record companies (1990, 162).

The celebration of "fan communities" appears also to have led to the construction of the "non-fan" as culturally impoverished. The progressive aspects of fan knowledge are counterposed to the knowledge deficits of those who do not share an appreciation for the commodity in question, in terms which suggest that there is something profoundly wrong with rejecting particular popular culture products. One exception to this is Schulze, White and Brown's (1993) analysis of Madonna's detractors, which takes non-random to be a form of resistance in itself. In other studies, the "non-fan" is constructed, not as one who possesses a different sort of cultural capital, but rather, as one who is deficient in cultural capital. As Livingstone observes, soap opera fans "enjoy the play among what **might** have been, what happened before and what might yet happen," while non-fans "simply see the genre as repeating the obvious and say 'So what, nothing really happened'" (1994, 444). Talk television fans, according to Livingstone, are more likely to take oppositional and participatory approaches to the genre, while non-fans, on the other hand, appear to be uninspired:

*(They) draw more upon classic, bourgeois public sphere expectations of the rules of debate, the value of expert contributions, and the goal of consensus — assumptions which make for a more closed reading of the genre and permit a more restricted, less diverse role for the viewer (Livingstone 1994, 444).*

Of course, that the latter appear to have somehow missed the pleasure boat flies in the face of any attempt to promote critical media literacy as a productive and gratifying enterprise among audiences for the mass media.

Economic considerations make only brief appearances in many of these analyses of consumer culture. Although Lewis (1990, 101) concedes that consumer culture has "economic consequences," she maintains that it is "still resilient and responsive to consumer interaction." To illustrate the proximity between American and British forms of cultural studies, it is worth noting that McRobbie describes the marketplace as "an expansive popular system" and the "collision place of capitalist commerce with popular desires."

Is it not worth asking, however, whether the experiences of consumers in a market-driven society discourage access to the material resources necessary for fans to attain a cultural authority that extends beyond the appropriation of star commodities? More fundamentally, shouldn't we acknowledge that corporate power and capitalist dynamics are "central forces in shaping the conditions for the production and negotiation of those systems of meaning that make up public culture"? (Murdock 1995, 90). Yet, many cultural studies scholars, in mistaking a critique of capital for a critique of the audience, have evaded these issues entirely.



## After the Class Divide

Responding to such questions moves us in the direction of political economy, which has become “relatively autonomous” from cultural studies (Garnham 1995). Garnham (1995, 71) defines the political economy of culture as the view that the capitalist mode of production has certain core characteristics (such as waged labour and commodity exchange) and that these “constitute people’s necessary and unavoidable conditions of existence.” In turn, these conditions shape, in determinate ways, the terrain of cultural practices: “the physical environment, the available material and symbolic resources, the time rhythms and spatial relations [...] they set the cultural agenda.” Class, in this conception, is the key structural determinant in questions of access to the means of production and the distribution of economic surplus (1995, 70). This is not to deny, however, that differences of gender and race thrive within the capitalist mode of production.

Why have so few feminists taken up the issue of political economy? The answer can be located in a number of divisions, one of which, the separation of patriarchy from capitalism, has already been explored. The division between cultural studies and political economy is institutional; cultural studies has tended to make its home in the humanities, while political economy is often pursued through the social sciences (Murdock 1995, 90). Women, who have been traditionally represented and recognised in larger numbers in the humanities, are often theoretically and methodologically separated from political economy as it is conducted across the boundaries of politics, economics and sociology. Although the field of communication studies is a hybrid of both humanities and social science disciplines, a gendered division of labour prevails here as well. More women are represented in the humanities-oriented study of popular culture, while more men are represented in the social science-oriented areas of political communication, new technologies and public policy (van Zoonen 1994, 124). There is nothing natural about these institutionalised, gendered divisions. Yet, the recognition that viewer/reader agency and political agency often issue from disparate locations is an important one; As Ang concedes: “fantasy is [...] a fictional arena which is relatively cut off and independent. [...] It does not function in place of, but beside, other dimensions of life (social practice, moral or political consciousness)” (1985, 135). A less optimistic interpretation of much of the work in cultural studies would suggest that mass-mediated fiction locates the politically inactive subject firmly within relations of dominance and subordination.

In many respects, cultural studies’ avoidance of political economy reflects the pervasive problem of felt powerlessness throughout the populace at large. Young (1990, 56) argues that the primary division of labour in advanced capitalism is between professionals and non-professionals, and, among the latter, exploitation and oppression takes the form of powerlessness. The powerless are those who lack authority, status and sense of self; they exercise no power but have power exercised over them, take orders but make no decisions. The hierarchical structure of policy-making and -implementation, in particular, prevents the powerless from direct participation in public policy decisions. In the face of this, and given the overdetermination of powerlessness in respect to gender, race, and class, the retreat from a political-economic critique appears as self-imposed exile.

Political economy and questions of class have made limited appearances in feminist cultural studies of the media, in the form of institutional analysis, textual analysis,

and reception analysis. Radway's work on romance readers was conceived as the study of a complex social process beginning with the romance novels' publication within an institutional matrix and culminating in the "actual construction of texts by real women who inhabit a particular social world" (1984, 12). Far more compelling is her subsequent work (1989) which examines the history of the editorial structure and middle-brow discourse of the Book-of-the-Month Club. Likewise, Ang's recent work (1991) has focused on the forms of cultural authority which emanate from the construction of the audience concept within television industry discourse, academic discourse and in society as a whole. Yet, similar to Radway and van Zoonen, Ang prizes consumption over production and reiterates the centrality of ethnography, which "promises to offer us vocabularies that can rob television audiencehood of its static muteness" (1991, 170).

As Jameson (1991, 346) suggests, within postmodernism, the cultural logic of late capitalism, a review of institutions does not allow one to arrive at the mode of production so much as it has come to replace it. "Institutions" are the externality of "groups," while "mode of production" and "class" seem to have become more difficult to identify, let alone analyse. Institutional analysis is no substitute for either class analysis or an expanded critique of capital. When "class" explicitly appears in feminist media studies, it is most often separated from institutional analyses. Moreover, "class" is presented as a designation of just another "group" or a form of the subject's psychic identity. As befits the cultural logic of late capitalism, any adequate representation of the ruling class is excluded (Jameson 1991, 349).

Even in studies in which "class" enjoys a privileged, nominal place, the category is grossly undertheorised. In textual analyses of popular media representations, class tends to be categorically confined, as something which can be read off the text. For some time, feminist film theorists have taken account of working class representations, in films including *Mildred Pierce*, *Stella Dallas*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and *Silkwood* (e.g., Williams 1988; 1990; Kaplan 1990). There is often a sense that certain films are chosen for class analysis because they are "about class," as though other films were not also ripe for class analysis.

Reception studies, similar to textual analyses, do not typically engage with questions related to relations of production. The point of performing naturalistic and ethnographic forms of research is to explore the lived experiences of respondents. However, research which associates social class position with, for example, television viewing places limits on the "lived experience" of class by turning "class" into a relation of consumption rather than production. "Class," then, comes to function as a demographic category rather than as an expression of cultural experience. Even then, the criteria that are supposed to represent social class are vague and unnecessarily divisive, given that they forsake an analysis of class which would identify all of the respondents as working class in the Marxist sense: in terms of control over the mode of production and production of surplus value.

Press, in her book *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class and Generation in the American Television Experience* (1991), takes the peculiar approach of observing the inadequacies of class definitions in traditional sociological literature, providing a literature review of Marxist (Marx, Weber, Poulantzas) approaches to class differences, moving to an exegesis of feminists' objections to the Marxist privileging of class, and finally, rather inexplicably, resorting to traditional, sociological measures in judging whether her female respondents were working- or middle-class. More-

over, her division of women by virtue of blue-collar (working class) occupations and pink- and white-collar occupations works more effectively as an observation regarding social status than one regarding social class.

Jordan (1992), in her naturalistic inquiry into mass media use in the family system, also confuses "class" with "status." In her study of families chosen to represent three levels of socio-economic status, she attempts to categorise class position by level of education and occupational prestige. The category of "upper-middle-class" describes families in which both parents have finished college, one or both have an advanced college degree, and both are employed in high-prestige positions. The "middle-class" describes families in which one parent has a college degree and at least one parent has a white-collar job of less prestige than upper-middle-class occupations. And, the "working class" category is applied by Jordan if the highest level of education in the family did not exceed two years in college and both parents have a low-prestige job (1992, 385). Similarly, in one of the more sophisticated analyses of the class-specific appeal of certain 1980s Hollywood films, Traube (1992) concentrates upon the professional middle-class, whose status derives from education rather than capital or property.

The problem is that status and class, while not unrelated, do not describe the same structural phenomenon. Status is based on social stratification, which may have its roots in class relations but is also sustained by society's value systems, which may work to camouflage the class structure through ideological means. Unlike a status group, which is defined by the place it occupies and the function it performs in society, a class is defined by the fact that it is in structural contradiction with another class at the intersection of forces and relations of production (Saffioti 1978, 23). In a precise sense, social classes are "human groupings which occupy antagonistic structural positions in the system of goods and services, that is, groupings whose chief difference lies in the fact that one of them creates, directly or indirectly, the surplus value appropriated by the other" (Saffioti 1978, 25). The phenomenon of social class is part of the economic infrastructure, while the phenomenon of social status belongs to the ideological superstructure. The infrastructure and superstructure mutually determine one another, which is why a relationship is sustained between class structure and social stratification. Many feminist scholars may be unaware of the extent to which they have embraced the liberal ideology of individual success and upward mobility in substituting status for class and gauging class position by the criteria of education and occupation.

## Conclusion

Given the difficulty of undertaking a full analysis of culture and class, it is not surprising that the more easily defined status groups become the vehicle for expressing attributes of class. As Jameson (1993, 346) notes, "Classes are few; they come into being by slow transformation in the mode of production; even emergent they seem perpetually at distance from themselves and have to work hard to be sure they really exist as such." Groups seem somehow more recognisable and representable. But, if we are not to give up on class, we must recognise how classes become classes, how, as Marx discusses in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, class-in-itself becomes class-for-itself. Classes come into being through struggles between organised class forces. The best way to understand inimical classes is to first understand how they are both opposed and united through a specific antagonism, at the site of property, division of labour,

mode of production and the state. The political economy of culture, I would suggest, is the best means for locating the antagonism at the crux of the relationship between classes and cultures. Today, one antagonism that is ripe for intervention is that between an expanding, merging and increasingly powerful for-profit media and those who are unable to access this media except as consumers.

Given the failure of many feminisms to confront the structural arrangements of late capitalism and their influences on culture, it would be something of a relief if a critique of the market economy made an occasional appearance in feminist media studies, even if classes went without mention. Folbre (1994), in attempting to recognise the differences within capitalism, has introduced an interesting conception of the "structures of constraint" that delimit the choices made by people in their everyday confrontation with social, political and economic realities. Her notion takes into account structures of constraint based upon gender, class, nation, race, age, and sexual preference, among other factors (Folbre 1994, 38) All of these factors co-exist with and co-influence one another but are aligned and realigned in ways that form differing bases for collective identity, interest and action around issues of political and economic justice (1994, 60). Folbre's conception of collective structures of constraint sheds considerable light on what may constitute a contemporary version of "the woman question:" an effective framework for the limitations on choices made by human agents within the context of social structures, the politicisation of differences, the expression and suppression of identities and interests through forms of collective action, and the formation of alliances among individuals by virtue of their location in respect to interlocking structures of constraint.

Amidst this recognition of sectional identities, what becomes of the Marxist emphasis on class, the belief that the development of capitalism would erode gender and other differences and that the undoing of capitalism and the transition to socialism would be the work of a unified, class-conscious proletariat? Marx and Engels could not see into a future in which advanced capitalist development would exacerbate the fragmentation of groups into identity-specific coalitions. So, does "class" no longer make a difference? Perhaps the best response is Negt and Kluge's defence of the use of the expression "proletarian public sphere" (1993, xiv): "it is wrong to allow words to become obsolete before there is a change in the objects they denote."

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