Resisting Capital: Simulationist and Socialist Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Postmodern theory has problematized the concepts and concerns of Marxism with respect to socialist praxis. One of the most diligent examples of this engagement comes from Jean Baudrillard's simulation theory. Pronouncing the death of Marxist categories, such as depth and revolution, simulation theory offers an aleatory, indeterminate model of society where the real implodes into the hyperreal. With special attention to the concept of resistance, this essay assesses the conceptual framework of both simulation and socialist theory for their promises and problems in the context of postmodernity. Bringing historical materialism into dialogue with simulation theory reasserts the importance of Marxism in addressing the unfinished project of social emancipation. There is much to suggest that with the real becoming hyperreal, exploitation intensifies into hyperexploitation. In short, notwithstanding the merits of simulation theory, Marxist concepts and concerns are still central to both radical theory and praxis. Bringing the merits of simulation theory to Marxism offers a social theory of meaning in the context of capitalism.

"Resisting Capital: Simulationist and Socialist Strategies"

In the second millennium, social theorists are in a mad dash to construct new ways of explaining the shifting terrains of social life. Specifically, theory generation over the role of capital in today's postmodern condition arguably represents a dominant matrix in academic discussions. Clearly, one of the most fertile terrains in the debate over current conditions

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represents the engagement between Marxist theories and postmodern discourses. Discussions over theory generation benefit from critically addressing this intersection. Having witnessed the victories as well as failures of the 1960's movements to revolutionize social life and then the subsequent fall of the former Soviet republics, many intellectuals attempted to move "beyond" the polemics and promises of Marxism. Jameson (1988a) has suggested that one cannot avoid periodization, in the sense that postmodern theory arrived in a context following the material dissolution of colonial rule and the change in social thought to explain this new formation. It is a bit like living in an era of post-Michaels, following the fall of the era of Michael Jordan, Michael Jackson, and the Soviet Michael, Gorbachev. Dubbed as the "postmodern turn" in social theory, the "post" in po-mo, posty, post-ism, or post-al thought has been interpreted as *anti* modern theories like Marxism. In particular postmodern thought has pummeled Marxist theory with objections to its universals and totalities: in short, its *hubris* and *hamartia*.

The most extreme challenge to Marxist orthodoxy issues from Jean Baudrillard's simulation theory, an ironic discourse of resistance through strategies of hyperconformity, which insist that the real has been absorbed in the hyperreal, the copy with no original. Responding to theoretical developments in various post-ism's, Marxist scholars found themselves doing double duty: generating new modes of thought to resist capital's general expansion into everyday life as well as responding to the postmodern challenge of linguistic play and *jouissance*. It is at this intersection between socialism and simulation where capital is wedged. Critical scholars have found that scholarship must confront the effects of capital on the sign. For example, critical theorists have suggested the need for a political hermeneutics that provides scholars and students with the most emancipatory strategies against the distortions of capital (see Leonardo, in press). In this essay, I examine the merits and problems of simulation theory through the works of Jean Baudrillard. Furthermore, the essay engages the Marxist resistance to postmodern condition as the most recent incarnation of capitalist relations of exploitation. Because of the globalization and intensification of capital, resistance theory becomes even more central to the project of negation. In other words, although the essay acknowledges the shift in culturo-technological life, it also argues that the postmodern condition does not represent a break from capitalist production but rather an extension of it. Finally, bringing Marxism in conversation with simulation theory affirms the dialogical arm of Marxism through its ability to engage, rather than merely refute, competing claims. As such, while the essay problematizes Baudrillard's simulation theory, it appropriates useful insights from his contributions and joins them with a socialist praxis.

Jean Baudrillard's Simulation Theory

Jean Baudrillard's (1988a, 1988b, 1981, 1975) early work foreshadowed what would eventually become his official break from Marxism. *The System of Objects*, *Consumer Society*, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, and *The Mirror of Production*, all dealt from an arm's length with Marxist interpretations of society. In these early texts, Baudrillard privileged consumption over production in attempts to understand the social *meanings* behind production. By prioritizing consumption over production, Baudrillard emphasizes the superstructure over the base in Marxist theory. Baudrillard was part of an intellectual movement – along with Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard (and later their followers) – searching for new ways to theorize the current conditions of social life characterized by fast capitalism and an even faster technology and communication system. In effect, Baudrillard and many other French theorists coming out of the 1960's tried to put Marx back onto his superstructural feet. For example, in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Baudrillard tried to institute a revolution through semiotic Marxism by linking exchange and use value with sign value, or the way social meaning conspires with the structural logic of the economic system. Despite his growing disenchantment with classical Marxist categories, Baudrillard was still haunted by Marx's ghosts and he spent a considerable amount of text deconstructing concepts like labor, value, and history.

Considered part of the "discursive turn" in social theory, Baudrillard advanced his assault on Marxist theory by downplaying class struggle and later denigrating economic revolution. Through engagement with discourses on cultural (as opposed to historical) materialism, Baudrillard's love/hate relationship with Marxism is now purely one of animosity. Simply put, the economic sphere cannot assume its privileged position of alterity because the priority of political economy is jettisoned. Thus, resistance to capitalism seems ironically bourgeois and passé. The economic base is not "the last instance" so it does not require an organic stance from a self-proclaimed theoretical terrorist like Baudrillard. Whereas Antonio Gramsci (1971) encouraged people to become "organic" intellectuals, Baudrillard, following Georges Bataille, adopts the "orgiastic" intellectual, one who functions under the sign of excess and waste, rather than economic production. The proliferation of meaning in the current social formation postmodernizes the economy as a discursive concept that has no inherent privilege over other signifiers, like desire, eroticism, and seduction. And if the capitalist economy is no longer "real" in the theater of semiurgy, then resistance to it is likewise a spurious strategy. For over a century, socialists have resisted capitalist accumulation with the idea of communist production. To Baudrillard, much time has been wasted resisting a system

that seems to strengthen as a result of resistance. It is as if capitalism grows as it feeds on minor subversions, like union strikes. On the other hand, the ironic strategy of conforming to the system's imperatives (what Baudrillard calls "code") saturates it to the point of collapse, much like a person who overeats only to vomit. So rather than resist, people should *assist* the consumption of commodities (i.e., the object system) until, like a potlatch, there is no more to consume (Bataille 1997, 1991, 1988, 1985; see also, Richardson 1994; McLaren, Leonardo, and Allen 2000, 1999).

However, this does not suggest that social critique is no longer valid. To Baudrillard, critique becomes a form of seduction, not reduction (a common critique of Marxism). Critique is a form of gift that seduces those it engages to respond with greater intensity, not synthesis. Therefore, dialectical materialism is out, excremental materialism is in. The point of critique is not to arrive at deep embedded structures of exploitation on the road to truth and emancipation, but rather, as Bataille might suggest, to laugh excessively and cynically in the face of it all. Critique becomes an exercise of waste rather than production. To Baudrillard, following Bataille, exploitation is not a tragedy but a comedy. And Marxism, as the harbinger of it all, is the biggest show in town. It led people to think that a deep narrative existed *as* and *in* the form of history through labor and class struggle, a story to be sure but one that assumed a true world. Taking from *Ecclesiastes*, Baudrillard (1983a) follows the dictum: "The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth – it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true" (p. 1). And then again: "Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum" (p. 11). Following Nietzsche, Baudrillard dismantles any notion of a true, or transcendental world. So what choice is there but to laugh at the suggestion of an uncynical, true world? Contrary to Marxist analysis of workers in the textile industry, one should critique workers as texts. To Baudrillard, critique is much less about emancipation (since this assumes an essence to be liberated) and more about semiotic play and "visions of excess," of betting even when one has little to wager. At least with betting, one surrenders to the concept of chance, an enchantment lost in rationalist, modernist discourses.

Throwing the reality principle off balance with an upper cut, Baudrillard throws a left hook at productivist theories. His knock out punch comes to us in the form of simulation theory. In Baudrillard's (1994, 1990, 1983b, 1983a, 1979) more recent works, like *Simulacra and Simulation*, *Fatal Strategies*, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, *Simulations*, and *Seduction*, Baudrillard develops a theory of simulation that ushers his concept of hyperreality. As Baudrillard (1983a) puts it, the condition of hyperreality is

> a fantastic telescoping, a collapsing of the two traditional poles into one another: an IMPLOSION – an absorption of the radiating model of causality, of the differential mode of determination, with its positive and negative electricity – an implosion of meaning. *This is where simulation begins*... the possibility of *an explosion towards the center*. (Pp. 57 and 74; italics in original)

The two poles of Marxist dialectics (the proletariat and bourgeoisie) become simulated entities, that is, understood as signs that implode into one another and lose their privileged status. As such, political economy is neither the first cause nor the *cause celebre*. In simulation theory, the real is no longer a valid concept because the current economy functions through the production (understood as a sign) of copies without an original. That is, postmodern economy loses the notion of identity so dear to modernist understandings of production. The object and all of its daily vicissitudes (e.g., knowledge) are produced for the very reason that they are reproducible.

We live in a social formation marked by relations of reproduction, not production. What is lost is a previous era's sense of aura. Postmodern condition is like a joke with neither punchline nor target. At least with modern jokes, one has appeal to the irony's other, or the normal case. In Baudrillard's postmodern sensibilities, all sense of reference collapses. To Fredric Jameson (1988b), postmodern "pastiche" is

> like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor. (P. 16; italics in original)

To put it another way, Baudrillardean postmodernism is the laughter left in the wake of the disappearance of truth and essence. Humor is lost for the precise reason that it is everywhere; social life is humorous. Postmodern hyperproduction becomes a form of general reproduction of social life so that even ideas are only copies of other ideas that precede them.

In popular culture, one only has to count the number of songs that are remakes of previous hits. The singer, Mariah Carey, has little incentive to produce an "original" song if she can make as much, if not more, money by remaking old standby's, like Michael Jackson's "I'll be there." Since radio stations rarely premise these songs as remakes of an old hit, much of the public (especially the youth) assumes that the current singer *is* the originator of them. So much the better for Mariah Carey; the same goes for reproduction. In all, a sense of originality is lost and consequently a disenchantment with radicalism as the search for true consciousness

and knowledge of reality. By definition, consciousness *is* false because it is supplemented by its other, the unconscious, another one of those annoying discourses of "depth" (Baudrillard 1979). Rather than discourses of depth, Baudrillard (1994, 1993, 1983a, 1975) advocates discourses of death: e.g., of labor, value, social, history, etc. By pronouncing the death of Marxist categories, Baudrillard testifies to their status as signs that have no privilege over other signs. By evicting Marxist dialectics, Baudrillard also gives the social a new lease toward a world of the not yet.

It should be noted that Baudrillard's hyperconformist strategy is not an original idea. By advocating assistance rather than resistance – that is, to harness capitalist energy and implode it – Baudrillard articulates a theory that is traceable to versions of eastern philosophy. Also known as "taking the path to least resistance," assistance is a strategy of directing energy rather than opposing it. We see this clearly in the martial art of Judo where the neophyte is taught to use the attacker's energy against itself and to avoid meeting force with force. The Judo student learns to use the attacker's momentum against itself by stepping aside or shifting his weight at the critical moment. In other spheres of life, complementarity is the preferred sign, the yin and yang of life's energies. This establishes the point that Baudrillard's theory of "least resistance" is shocking only when considered within a narrow logic of western thought. What differentiates it from eastern philosophy is its application. Baudrillard generalizes assistance (hyperconformity) to include consumptive and discursive practices.

In Baudrillard's descriptions, the real has been realized and so has utopia. In other words, we live in a post-utopian world. Those who continue to construct discourses characterized by utopian themes, like truth, emancipation, and revolution simply missed the boat. There is nothing remaining but to play with the leftover pieces, a combinatorial transgression of laws and determinisms. Ours is a world characterized by a reversal, a sociality that proceeds from the model, or Baudrillard's construction of information society as a pre-packaged, DNA-like determined, code. Facts no longer follow real events. Real events are first modeled and then they transpire in the real so that they can be reproduced by simulation apparatuses, like the media. If maps, as models, represent the real, then this is a modernist idea. Reversing this relationship, Baudrillard (1983a) argues,

> Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory – **precession of simulacra**. (P. 2; emphasis in original)

There are some clear implications resulting from Baudrillard's reversal. With respect to the media, journalists no longer report the news but actually create it. In the age of simulation, the media does not represent the site of news production but new reproductions. The news has already been modeled before it happens in the real: a bit like the movie, "Wag the Dog." Even people's actions (which news is apparently about) follow the same genetic laws. Reporting news is only an exercise in pretending that something akin to a fact just occurred. Baudrillard's (1994) cynical power takes this form, "The media and the official *news service* are only there to maintain the illusion of an actuality, of the reality of the stakes, of the objectivity of facts" (p. 38; italics in original). Thus, like "Wag the Dog" Baudrillard exposes the media's phony attempt to report the news. Instead, news reporting signals the relations of simulation. Reporters pretend to report the news and the mass pretends to believe it.

Our era is characterized by simulative (as opposed to productive) relations. To Baudrillard, social control is more accurately secured by seizing the means of simulation, the media being one of its central nodes of power. In the era of simulation, controlling images supercedes domination of productive forces. The seducing image class is able to propagate and project its "gift" for the masses. Rather than the bourgeoisie exploiting labor, the dominant image class secures its power by seducing the mass into its messages and thereby instituting its power through the act of giving. It is then the obligation of the mass to consume the images and demand more, that is, to raise the stakes, and thereby instituting power in its favor: and the seduction continues. The current mode of simulation we function under is characterized by the revenge of the object, or those human strategies patterned after the object world, not unlike "primitive" societies, which endowed objects with magical powers. It is this object world which Baudrillard generalizes in the postmodern condition and which finds its expression in the media as a simulative apparatus.

Reproduction is near perfect replication as the model determines the outcomes before they happen in the real, understood now to be a copy: hyperreal. That is how Baudrillard (1995) was able to shock the world with the pronouncement that "the Gulf War did not take place." By this, he meant that the war was modeled through the media before it was represented for and consumed by the public, not that it did not occur. In hyperreality, the copy is more real than the real. Miniaturized copies of cities portrayed in Disneyland are alibis for the real. They are testimony to the fact that U.S. cities are as much models as those in Disneyland. But perhaps Baudrillard's (1994) own description drives home the point when he says,

> Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the "real" country, all of "real" America that *is* Disneyland (a bit like prisons are there to hide that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, that is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation... This world [Disneyland] wants to be childish in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the 'real' world, and to conceal the fact that true childishness is everywhere – that it is that of the adults themselves who come here to act the child in order to foster illusions as to their real childishness. (Pp. 12-13; italics in original)

This is classic Baudrillard at his most brazen. This is cynical power at its height and more Nietzsche than Nietzsche: hyperNietzsche. For those who have been to Disneyland, one cannot help to drive the screw a quarter turn more.

Disneyland's "charm" works through its politics of nostalgia (Giroux 1999, 1994). It harks back to the frontier days of old, when America was a 'heroic' land, white men could act racist in public and be proud of it, and Africans were slaves. Ride the jungle ride at Disneyland and you get the sense that the offensive depiction of Africans as either buffoons or headhunters is only play, only fictive, and not to be taken seriously. Then you realize that this *is* America in miniature, a racist land where African Americans are treated as subhuman by the white imagination. Think some more and you realize that Disney is probably well aware of this but does not care. In fact, it may be what many of the park's visitors (domestics and tourists) expect and want to see. After eating your ice cream bar, you advance to Fantasyland and enjoy the ride, "It's a Small World." Here you are taken on a tour across the cultures, into the costume-world that is America. You see Mexican, Chinese, and African miniatures: dancing, smiling, and blinking their eyes at you. In fact, this is not very different from the kinds of images children receive about 'foreigners' in uncritical forms of multiculturalism: food, folks, and fun. As Baudrillard points out, Disneyland represents a general alibi for the hypocrisies and transparent politics in social life. At least you don't have to pay to get into real life! Baudrillard's simulation theory encourages people to forget about originary sources and revel in cynical indeterminacy. This is the challenge he poses to his readers.

Marxist Theory as Boomerang

Notwithstanding the seductive appeal of Baudrillard's postmodern theory, modernist philosophies, like Marxism, have responded aggressively to the current crisis in social theory. Marxism is said to have a boomerang-like

quality to the extent that the more theorists reject it the more fiercely it returns (Buroway 2000). Indeed, there has been a shift in cultural field through electronic communication, cyber identities, and mediatized subjectivities. We understand that Foucault and fatness are surveilled by discourses of thin; Baudrillard's bawdy narratives bring us some needed bounce in social theory; Lyotard's language games are laudable for exposing the limitations of western meta-narratives as universal for all societies. For as Bataille (1997, 1991, 1988, 1985; see also, Richardson 1994; Noys 1997; McLaren, Leonardo, and Allen 2000) has argued, "primitive" exchange functions under discourses of waste and expenditure, not production. But to suggest that we are beyond the age of capital as an objective force is surely to perpetuate another myth in the name of social fiction: social because it is still social theory, fiction because it projects a futuristic, albeit creative, world out of sync with current relations of exploitation.

It is now a popular refrain to discredit socialism based on the fact that the former Soviet Union has fallen and other socialist economies, like China, approach a mixed economy. Indeed, the former Soviet Union was no poster child of Marxist utopia. Far from it. It began with Stalin's reign of terror, then punctuated by an inefficient bureaucratic system that made it all but impossible to respond to changes in social life. This rigidity eventually led to its fall from legitimacy. In fact, the fall of "official" Marxism may be preferred with respect to the future development of Marxist thought (Bottomore et al. 1991:126-127). This point has led some thinkers to interpret that capitalism, especially in its American form, has worked. And of course it has. It has worked to benefit the few multinational corporations who own the wealth and means of production to control other people's lives and their ability to make a descent life for themselves. It has worked to exploit the labor of men, women, and children who have only their labor to sell. It has worked to further divide the working class from their middle class neighbors. After all, they confront one another on a daily basis through work, school, and friendships whereas members of the bourgeoisie send their children to private schools and remain out of sight. Finally, capitalism has worked to subvert world peace because monopolizing oil is more important than solving the Middle East crisis. If communism failed because of its rigidity, then capitalism has "worked" ironically because of its flexibility.

The dialectical tension between discourse and historical materialism is productive, but the "end of the real" thesis appears unsustainable, and worse, complicit with relations of exploitation. In fact, ludic postmodernists may have succeeded in dodging Scylla only to strengthen Charybdis. It is fair to assume that if the United States were to become a socialist state,

white men will likely hold the important bureaucratic positions, therefore racism will still be a problem and women will find themselves fighting for gender rights. The ugliest forms of racist and patriarchal relations may significantly decrease through economic transformation, but race and gender relations will not become insignificant in socialist America (Hunter 2002). Thus, social theory must incorporate an analysis of differences, especially in their commodified form. Here, postmodern theorizing has been helpful. Discourses of difference remind us that although gender, sexual, and race issues do not exist autonomously from material relations, they are articulated in meaningful ways that have their particular concerns. For example, we notice that socialist Cuba had to reconstruct the family, Mao's China instituted the cultural revolution, and the elite in the former Soviet Union was all but male. Difference is inflected by the economy, but is not determined by it in the orthodox sense of Marxism.

To the extent that Marxist praxis neglects the specific discourses of identity formation, it is guilty of subsuming the social meanings that racialized, gendered, and sexualized subjects experience on a daily basis, some of which inform the epistemological work of revolutionary movements. Reducing identity politics to an individual's experience minimizes the institutional aspect of a subject's identity. But asserting identity in its traditionally vague way assumes an *a priori* sameness between those who invoke it, some of whom may experience a rude awakening when they discover the pane of difference (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Rather, the *process* of identification may be preferable to the apparent *condition* of having an identity. This is where Nancy Fraser's (1998) ideas on the politics of (mis)recognition ameliorate the otherwise vulgar suggestion that identity is private and only particular. She deploys a neo-Weberian model for addressing the differential status and rights of gays and lesbians in the context of heterosexist capitalism. This is an area where orthodox Marxism has been criticized for its refusal to address identity discourses with respect to rights, prestige, and status.

Although Baudrillard's theories did not create the notion of difference, they attend to its contours. The politics of identity is based on the notion that groups of people have been treated as merely different in patterned ways that have material sources and consequences (Leonardo 2000, 2002). For example, the social movement we know as the Civil Rights Movement was supra-individual. It was the recognition by masses of people of color, women, and gays and lesbians that the white, male, heterosexual state was deliberately thwarting their rights as *groups* of people. There is also a sense that the 1960's identity politics movement extended beyond identity *as* politics-of-the-self when white Americans joined hands with people of color and acknowledged that minorities were being oppressed on the basis

of their identity. Looked at in this way, we can avoid relegating identity politics to the margins of theory as a form of privatized discourse having no ties with material life. There is something to suggest that the "new identity politics" and materialist politics are compatible. For the very notion of identity is traceable to the material flow of life and how, for example, the black body is commodified as the sexualized subject. In other words, a materialist identity politics is part of an overall and more complete transformation of objective life insofar as it leaves its stamp on our subjectivity. Identity is real because it is part of the productive process insofar as workers gain an identity through their practical activity. To the extent that identity is abstract, it is imagined. It is very much like the sort of thing that Levi-Strauss described as a "'virtual center (*foyer virtuel*) to which we must refer to explain certain things, but without it ever having a real existence"' (cited by Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 9; italics in original). Keeping in mind the dialectic between the real and imagined aspects of identity, theorists avoid a fetishism of either pole.

If by myth we mean the codes that bind the social field and not the opposite of truth, then emancipation may be one of the strongest, modernist myths. Toward this end, Ebert's (1996) commitment to Marxist praxis is loud and clear, especially with respect to the shortcomings of "ludic feminism." Marxism may not emancipate the social *once and for all* through praxis but this does not suggest that it is a modernist hoax. As a form of revolutionary praxis, Marxism is indispensable for social transformation. Rallying around a praxis that emphasizes *continuous* and *increasing* emancipation of people from material exploitation represents a genuine accomplishment of modernist enlightenment of the Marxist strain. Guarding against the pitfalls of naive enlightenment, such as the vulgar type of Marxism which posits the historical inevitability of socialism, does not militate against all other redeeming facets of Marxism. That is, if we consider postmodernism, as Lyotard (1984) clarifies, as a filter or detour for late modernism (as opposed to an epoch after it), in such a way that an idea is modern only after it becomes postmodern, then the project of emancipation is a possibility or potentiality, not an inevitability.

With respect to the difference between inevitability versus the necessity of socialism, I am not far off from the position offered by the Frankfurt School, as summarized by Raymond Geuss. Geuss (1981) says the following,

> The members of the Frankfurt School take it as an important distinguishing feature of their "critical" version of Marxism (and a sign of its superiority over more orthodox versions) that they do not categorically predict the "inevitable" coming of the classless society. Marxism as a theory of society claims to give *knowledge* of the *necessity* of a transformation of the present social order into a

> classless society... From the fact [sic] that the agents have an overwhelming practical interest in bringing about an objectively possible transformation, it does not follow that the transformation is inevitable. (P. 77; italics in original)

Emancipation from objective, parasitic relations takes commitment to a politics of resistance. It requires more than critical reflection because, all by itself, social thought does not liberate real conditions (Freire 1993). In addition to radical thought, it takes a radical and practical activity to transform the environment. A critical theory starts from the premise that subjective reflection on objective structures begins the process of emancipation. But without practical action, reflection is as effective as reading the assembly directions for a new microwave stand and discovering that the parts are missing! Marxism is still a necessary and stubborn tool for explaining the persistence of suffering and human degradation. Thus a project of emancipation cannot dispense with active resistance to capital because it subverts people's rational understanding of their actions. Moreover, as revolutionary praxis, Marxism explains as well as provides the combustion for emancipatory knowledge. As capitalism commodifies the entire edifice of social life, the need for liberation is confused with the need to consume, the need for rational action with the need to shop.

Resistance is in diametric opposition to Baudrillard's notion of hyperconformity, or assistance. This is less a negation of Baudrillard's contributions and more of a politicization of the heuristic value of simulation theory. Resisting capital requires a commitment to explaining the stubborn persistence of real suffering in people's lives. Resistance here is less a search for essence and more about becoming aware of ideological misrecognition and working toward identifying its genetic sources in order to create conditions free of coercion and exploitation (Geuss 1981). Thus, resistance in postmodernity retains a privileged place in transformational politics. Because of its invidious presence in basically all facets of postmodern life, capital assumes a central point for resistance. It is accurate to describe social life as quite complex and web-like to the extent that it becomes hard to trace the originary source of social phenomena. But this does not militate against targeting those differences which make the most difference in creating unequal relations of power. In other words, some differences make more difference than others. Ideological class difference is obviously more determining of one's choices in life than differences between belly buttons, inny or outty. In the same vain, in the current regime of signs, differences within discourses about sexuality are more significant than differences within discourses about, say, ice cream preference. Prioritizing differences is both a logical and political nature of being human (Eagleton 1996). That said, class difference remains a stubborn concept in postmodernity.

With deconstruction, we understand that western metaphysics has functioned under the sign of logocentrism, or the privileging of the "metaphysics of presence," as Derrida (1976) defines it. In this, western philosophy is guilty of neglecting the differential play of silence in the sign's apparent self-presence, which both 'supplements' and subverts the presence. For example, the signifier "white" only exists in relation to its silent and abnormalized supplement, "non-white" (which is a code for black in the binary discourse of the United States). The signifier "rational" (read "men") only exists in supplementarity with "emotional" (read "women"). It is this silent other that compromises the security of the sign's presence in our attempt to fix the play of signs. In fact, Baudrillard (1994) explains that speech (as opposed to language) is the signifying difference between humans and animals. He writes,

> They, the animals, do not speak. In a universe of increasing speech, of the constraint to confess and to speak, only they remain mute, and for this reason they seem to retreat far from us, behind the horizon of truth. But it is what makes us intimate with them. It is not the ecological problem of their survival that is important, but still and always that of their silence. In a world bent on doing nothing but making one speak, in a world assembled under the hegemony of signs and discourse, their silence weighs more and more heavily on our organization of meaning. (P. 137)

It is not rationality, civilization, or labor that distinguishes humans from animals, but our capacity and their failure to speak. Although speaking creates poetry and beauty, it also institutes violence and discursive castration. Finding violence in silence acknowledges the power in non-participation (McLaren, Leonardo, and Allen 1999). One only has to recall being victim to someone else's "silent treatment." It represents a subjective field of experience that is never completely severed from its other; that is, silence is intimate with presence. It is not a stretch to relate this description to the discursive formation of the bourgeoisie, which is parasitic on the worker's discourse. In the act of speaking, bourgeois discourse recalls its relationship with the worker as radical other. Marxism adds the dimension of resistance grounded on revolutionary praxis. Thus, the concern for transformation leads us to "supplement" deconstruction with socialist praxis because, as Althusser (1969) suggests, although the concept of overdetermination avoids the pitfalls of classical Marxism, the economy is an overarching force in people's daily lives.

Despite the fact that there are, as deconstruction correctly suggests, differences *within* signs – like class, gender, and race – there exist important differences *between* them (Ebert 1996). That is, classes have both discursive and non-discursive aspects to them. Discourse does not determine the objective conditions around an exploited, alienated worker. Regardless of

how a sweat shop worker constructs the meaning around her work or the joy she may receive fraternizing with her co-workers (if this is even allowed), her labor is still exploited and alienated. Regardless of how she may conceptualize her working conditions as somehow better than the objective conditions of being workless, her work still satisfies someone else's search for profit. Although resignification may assist the project of social transformation, it alone cannot feed the hungry and house the homeless. For the exploited have needs that are more immediate than their desire to be signified in particular ways. In a sense, provide the hungry with food and they could care less how they are inserted into discourse! But this is an oversimplification.

Marxism represents less a theory about final transformation of objective life and more of a continuous process of material awareness and dialogue. For example, Georg Lukacs' (1971) historicist brand of Marxism suggests that revolutionary class consciousness arises out of the specific material needs of the working class. He writes, "It simply means that this objectivity is the self-objectification of human society at a particular stage in its development; its laws hold good only within the framework of the historical context which produced them and which is in turn determined by them" (p. 49). By saying this, Lukacs breaks with a certain transcendentalism within Marxism, a certain theory of universal class struggle. Lukacs speaks of an economic totality that drives all the contradictions at the local level despite the fact that certain things make sense to the individual. Emphasizing the totality, Lukacs makes a case for ideological misrecognition as a historical form of consciousness about the world. As such, working class ideology matures within a given economic development and is inscribed by it. But as the universal class that sees the world through its own experiences as well as through the capitalist imaginary the working class represents the general interest of society (a bit like Du Bois' (1989) concept of "double consciousness"). For the working class is in the position to see the totality outside of its own immediate interests, something the capitalist is unable to do because of his self-interest. Lukacs (1971) explains,

> With the emergence of historical materialism there arose the theory of the "conditions for the liberation of the proletariat" and the doctrine of reality understood as the total process of social evolution. This was only possible because for the proletariat the *total knowledge* of its class-situation was a vital necessity, a matter of life and death… From its own point of view self-knowledge coincides with knowledge of the whole so that the proletariat is at one and the same time the subject and object of its own knowledge. (P. 20; italics added)

Although Lukacs adopts the inevitability approach to revolution, he advocates a specific materialist resistance to capital that takes into account

the specific needs and stage of working class consciousness. Through a complete understanding of the social formation at a given time, the working class develops the first element of revolutionary praxis: a certain consciousness of current material conditions.

For Lukacs, a target for working class critique is the general commodification of reality in capitalism. More and more, social life takes on the appearance of a commodity and this makes it more difficult to determine essence from epiphenomena, or the real from its reified forms. It is this general condition of reification that provides, for example, the context for Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal where the copy exceeds the original and the two implode. Where Baudrillard and Lukacs differ, however, is in their explanation out of this aporia. For Lukacs, greater dialectical critique and "ideological maturity" force contradictions to their revolutionary point, whereas for Baudrillard (1990) "fatal strategy" suggests that we adopt a seductive stance and consume desire until it irrupts into copies without trace. The theorist's trick is to attend to the materialist desire inherent in the working class movement to fight for basic needs, without which any discussion of desire becomes a form of neglect.

All this suggests that it is necessary to examine postmodernity in the context of late capitalism. Devoid of this move, social theory degrades into complicity with exploitation because it is not so much that socialism can dismantle forms of domination once and for all as much as it disables relations of exploitation, or the ugliest forms of domination. Without this critical ingredient, social theory ignores the macro determinants of thought that both inscribe and infect our attempts to explain current reality. Sidestepping this consideration produces what I have previously referred to as "social fiction." For despite the fact that it has become increasingly difficult for macro theories to account for the global movement of capital, they are indispensable for resisting those forces that disable the local politics of which Foucault speaks so fondly. Or as Best and Kellner (1991) put it, "[W]hile it is impossible to produce a fixed and exhaustive knowledge of a constantly changing complex of social processes, it is possible to map the fundamental domains, structures, practices, and discourses of a society, and how they are constituted and interact" (p. 260). Just as it was difficult for early modernists to identify with modernism, Best and Kellner suggest that we are in a transitional "borderline region" between the modern and postmodern that has yet to be adequately theorized. Or as Harvey (1989) puts it, we are in "a crisis within the former" rather than the birth of the latter (p. 116). Despite the postmodernist attempt to depict the modern subject like fish out of water, gasping for air, it is difficult to suggest that the fluid environment known as capitalism does not still envelop social life through shifting waves of profiteering and superexploitation.

In fact, there is much evidence to suggest that the condition of postmodernity represents the new capitalist formation designed to create flexible accumulation, new spaces for profit, and new bureaucratic accommodations. Instituting part-time work structures without benefits (e.g., adjunct professors and standby workers), exporting labor to foreign lands (e.g., sweat shops in the Philippines and Malaysia), and decentralizing state control (e.g., local control of schools) are ways to fragment both the objective basis of life which in turn, as Lukacs (1971) reminds us, fragments its companion, the subject of history. Just when fragmentation becomes more acute and detecting reification more challenging, abandoning socialist praxis may have come at the worst time. In fact, postmodernism's debut on the academic scene arrived at a suspicious time when Leftist activists were beginning to establish wider social support, cohesion, and momentum (Hartsock 1987). Fragmenting the subject of history, aleatory postmodernists contribute to the fragmentation of the Left. Just when a time to believe in emancipation becomes more pertinent, in comes the "New Gnosticism" (Hassan 1992). God is not just an opiate but dead. Even the Promethean theme is a thing of the past; there is no more of that fire he symbolized as inspirational knowledge. All we supposedly have are the leftover ashes.

There may be a break in capitalist accumulation, but this does not equate a transformation in relations of capital. It is perhaps just the opposite: the hyperintensification and hyperefficiency of capital. As David Harvey (1989) writes,

> [W]hat is most interesting about the current situation is the way in which capitalism is becoming ever more tightly organized *through* dispersal, geographical mobility, and flexible responses in labour markets, labour processes, and consumer markets, all accompanied by hefty doses of institutional, product, and technological innovation. (P. 159; italics in original)

Thus, the "newness" in postmodernity may in fact be the old, tiring modernist story of capital with a new chapter. This does not suggest that Butler's strategy of remetaphorization and Baudrillard's simulation theory do not lend subversive arsenal to the Left. Discourse may be deconstructive but exploitation still needs some explaining. Social theory can not confirm Bachelard's concept of an epistemological break by announcing that there is one. And this is ultimately the tragic side of simulation theory. It forsakes feminist praxis for a seductive theory in a time when chauvinism is at its all time high (therefore more sexist than sexist is not desirable), when racism becomes global (more racist than racist just produces more racists), and when consumption provides more capital for production (hyperconsumption generates more profit). Marx (1976) once

wrote, "Perseus wore a magic cap so that the monsters he hunted down might not see him. We draw the magic down over our eyes and ears to deny that there are any monsters" (p. 91). At a time when exploitation has become monstrified, we must not cut off our ears and pluck out our eyes to the obvious.

Ebert (1996) claims that despite the fact that language may be real, this does not mean that the real is made up of language. If social theorists make everything real, then nothing is real. As a social category and analytical tool, the real no longer serves any heuristic value for revolutionary understanding. It melts into thin air. There has to be a point wherein distinctions, as opposed to differences, have to be made with respect to production and signification. For example, although discourse may affect the real through regimes of meaning and truth, discourse alone results in an amputated praxis because it denies the fact that signs do not only have power from within but also from without. Defining power as diffuse, as Foucault (1978) advocates, forgets that power not only works through subjects as conduits and terminals, but power is also the power to exploit. Foucault (1986) attempts to make power *available* for the "care of the self," or those strategies, following Deleuze and Guattari's (1983) "body without organs," to improve upon the self beyond humanistic regimes of truth. It is a schizophrenic subject who functions with one foot within current truths and with the other foot in Bloch's "not yet."

But regimes of truth gain their privilege largely through their relationship with institutional power: in other words, through the real. Racist signifiers work the way they do because their targets are institutionally disempowered to begin with. There is hardly an existing white bourgeois male whose material life is threatened by the signifier, "honkey." Possibly originating as "hunky" and a slur for Hungarians, today honkey does not have material consequences in keeping down white men (Barrett and Roediger 2002). On the other hand, "nigger" or "wetback" oppress African Americans and Mexican Americans because of their racialized place in relations of production as well as how these signifiers have been used to break down their psyche and self-confidence (again, having material consequences). The same can be said about "bitch" for women and "queer" for gays and lesbians, even as they maintain their distinctions from other social movements. No amount of reclaiming the word seems to succeed in substantially changing the racist, sexist, and homophobic landscape without a simultaneous transformation of the economic system.

That said, language and discourse cannot be materialized away. That is, discourse's constitutive power to construct the real without actually producing it cannot be explained away but instead linked to the material, much like the vein of a Volosinov (1973) or John Frow (1994). The real is

made intelligible through signs that influence the construction of the real. If we understand this process in a dialectical manner, then the superstructure and base produce overdeterminations or that culture produces effects onto the economy (Althusser 1969). In this, Althusser accomplishes what J.M. Fritzman (1998) calls a version of "poststructural materialism." Along with Adorno, Althusser's innovations contributed to the transformation within orthodox Marxism to explain the role of discourse in creating subjects for the reproduction of the conditions of production. That is, in response to Lukacs' humanist or Hegelian Marxism, Althusser's anti-humanist brand of Marxism opts for a theory of subjectivity absent of references to universal humanity. As such, his problematic starts with the ideological interpellation of humans as subjects of ideology. Said another way, discourse interpellates, or inserts, humans into subject positions within language. Attempting to understand how ideology "works," Althusser explains that it is through discourse that subjects for production are secured by capital. Ideological apparatuses, like schools, induct students into their places within production by first inserting them into discourse. As far as Althusser emphasizes the base as the first cause, he is materialist, and as far as he eternalizes ideology, he is poststructural. Through discursive practices, subjects (mis)recognize their imaginary relations to the real for their real relations. Discourse is a form of representation of the real and not the real itself. As the science of Marxism establishes more rigorous standards for critique, this is said to be in diametric opposition to the evolution of normal standards for thought. Hence, as science evolves, ideology devolves and recruits increasingly more of everyday life into its domain.

Althusser's theory is in direct contrast to Alvin Gouldner's (1994) concept of ideology, which makes rational discourse possible through a meta-language. In this case, ideology exposes relations previously thought to be intimate with common sense. Through ideological thinking, subjects participate in rational dialogue, critique harmful traditions, and mobilize against them, using the power of the word as an ideological weapon. To Althusser, subjects fail to become materialist enough in the last instance because ideological thought usurps their power to think in non-ideological, or scientific, terms. This is essentially the difference between philosophy as a form of ideological speculation and theory as scientific activity (Ricoeur 1986). In Althusser's (1971) words, ideology can be described this way:

> What really takes place in ideology seems therefore to take place outside it. That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, "I am ideological." It is necessary to be outside ideology, i.e. in scientific knowledge, to be able to say: I am in ideology (a quite exceptional case) or (the general

> case): I was in ideology. As is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only applies to others, never to oneself... Which amounts to saying that ideology *has no outside* (for itself), but at the same time *that it is nothing but outside* (for science and reality). (P. 175; italics in original)

To Althusser, resisting capital is a scientific endeavor to decrease ideological thought. But like a proto-poststructuralist (pre-poststructuralist?), Althusser explains this as a slippage, a non-stable move to specify Marxist scientific thinking while generalizing the influence of ideology. Perhaps the kernel of truth in Althusserian Marxism comes from its vigilant discourse on ideology as eternal as the unconscious (see McLaren, Leonardo, and Allen 2000). That is, resisting capital as a form of ideological illusion requires a Marxist deferral, of Marxism never actually realizing its full materialist potential. Marxist discourse is always one step behind ideological thought, never actually catching up to its weaker prey. As science becomes more precise, more of the social field becomes engulfed by ideology. By suggesting this, Althusser projects Marxism into a status of permanence since its other, ideology, persists even in socialist society. What appears like a capitulation on the part of Althusser is, in essence, a projecting of Marx's science into a status of permanency.

A Marxist resistance to capital must engage the power of discourse to first access and then construct the real. This discourse must be based on the language of real subjects (Marx and Engels 1970). In his response to postmodern theory, Terry Eagleton (1996) affirms real, historical language: "The linguistic animal has the edge over its fellow creatures in all kinds of ways... Only a linguistic animal could have history, as opposed to what one imagines for a slug is just the same damn thing over again" (p. 73). To Eagleton, the capacity for language truly represents a human accomplishment. But it is not language as a given but a way to transform our sensuous life that Eagleton's difference from postmodernists, such as Baudrillard, hinges. It is true enough that humans have a language sensitive to the nuances of everyday life and snails do not. The critical difference between the two is the former's ability to change the objective basis of life through language rather than be the object of it. When language, as discourse, gives form to the world, then the form it assumes must be assessed as well. Marxist discourse may construct the world as a material, economic process, but this also leads it into certain praxiological commitments about addressing exploitation. Marxism may be a discourse just like any other, but it embodies a set of interventions which stem from its discursive structure: e.g., class struggle, relations of exploitation, and revolutionary praxis. Just as Marxism cannot materialize away language, neither can postmodernism discourse away the real.

Toward a Postmodern Socialism

Postmodern socialism requires that the subject of history understands how capital currently works, how the commodity form assumes its shape, and how reification naturalizes the real in what Ernest Mandel (1976) calls the "gigantic enterprise of dehumanization" (p. 65). Resisting capital insists that practical intellectuals deconstruct discourses for the purposes of arriving at silences that betray the political economic interests of the discourses themselves. For example, in analyzing media representations, Herman and Chomsky (1988) propose the strategy of disaggregating representations that manufacture the public's consent under the guise of professional journalism. Or in Guy Debord's (1994) terms, a revolutionary analysis of the media must arrive at its spectacular structure. That is, capital's new technological form as "spectacle" provides ideological distractions that divert the public's attention from a fuller understanding of the production of real life. Combining anarchism and a critique of political economy, Debord (1994) writes, "The SPECTACLE IS *capital* accumulated to the point where it becomes image" (p. 24; italics in original) and how late media uses "police methods to transform *perception*" (p. 74; italics in original). As long as the media produces spectacles in which the mass invests affectively, then it becomes more difficult to arrive at the political economy of mass media, an American industry worth billions of dollars through advertisements, all of which are part and parcel to the productive system and its exploitation of labor, commodification of the image (Baudrillard's sign value), and greed for profit (McChesney 2000).

In a popular 1990's television ad for *Canon* camera, the world ranked tennis player Andre Agassi smacks paint soaked tennis balls into a wall. Known as a rebel in the tennis scene (Agassi refused to attend the Wimbledon Championships in London because he disdained wearing white), Agassi takes on the image of an unorthodox sportsman for *Canon's* new model, "The EOS Rebel." The camera has nothing to do whatsoever with tennis or rebellion, i.e., the image value has little to do with the product's use value. The message – "Image is Everything" – works through the commodification of viewers' desire to associate with the image of a sexy sportsman: Agassi. The bottom line is purchasing the camera and as long as the capitalist can tap into the buyers' desires, then production remains unquestioned. Purchasing becomes a form of enfleshing the spectacle and fulfilling desire through vicarious associations.

Taking its cue from this ad, the soda company, *Sprite*, inverts the *Canon* message by portraying playground athletes and flashing the message – "Image is nothing. Thirst is everything. Obey your thirst." Hence, even the apparent attempt at negation shows a recuperative logic. Obeying your thirst is clearly an image, one which suggests an atavistic notion of

humans as animalistic. Furthermore, when we keep in mind *Sprite's* hip-hop campaign in the early 1990's (a rather "successful" one), then we understand that the company targets young African Americans through racist overtures of the sexed-up, virile black body. One might suggest that since its inception of the hip-hop campaign, Sprite's large increase in revenue implies that it "works" and that it satisfies its buyers' needs. In addition, intellectuals may even suggest that the innocent public, rather than being duped by the clever ad campaigns, in fact acts on its own desires. It is not the empirical case that the mass has avoided spectacles, rather that they want more spectacles!

Baudrillard offers insights to explain this dynamic. Deserving to be quoted at length, Baudrillard (1983b) says the situation is

> exactly like children face to face with the adult universe… The child resists on all levels, and to a contradictory demand he also responds with a double strategy. To the demand to be an object, he opposes all the practices of disobedience, revolt, emancipation; in short, a total claim to subjecthood. To the demand to be a subject, he opposes just as stubbornly and efficaciously with an object's resistance, that is to say, in exactly the opposite manner: infantilism, hyperconformism, a total dependence, passivity, idiocy. Neither of the two strategies has more objective value than the other. The *resistance-as-subject* is today unilaterally valorized and held as positive… But this is to ignore the equal or perhaps even superior impact, of all the *practices-as-objects* – the renunciation of the position of subject and of meaning – exactly the practices of the masses – which we bury and forget under the contemptuous terms of alienation and passivity. (Pp. 106-107; italics added)

Baudrillard advocates the revenge of the object, the more banal version of a subject's resistance. His portrayal of the mass as infantile reconfirms the contradictions inherent in capitalist conditions. The concern here is less with frustrations over contradictions (and yes they can be frustrating) and more with explaining them. The media manipulate images into spectacles and this is not a haphazard event. Advertisement designers decide on their target audience, brainstorm on common desires presumed to thrive in this segment of society (a social construction), and then combine suggestive images to prey on its audience's affective flows. Again, this process has an ultimate goal in mind: to maximize company profit. If *Sprite's* campaign has worked, then it results from manipulation of desire, not its fulfillment. *Sprite* summons the strongest myths surrounding boys and men, particularly young African Americans as animalistic, and exploits them for the benefit of a racist class relation. In this instance, resistance involves discursive interventions into the racialized organization of class relations. Said another way, media spectacles are first made intelligible at the level of discourse

then transformed as knowledge through the subject's understanding of real relations.

A few more examples should help drive home the point. A "Monster.com" commercial features children who claim that they want to be exploited when they grow up. One wants to follow orders while others have ambitions of being underappreciated and underrewarded. The message that Monster.com wants to send its consumers is that the company does not participate in such chicanery. At work here is a bit of Baudrillardean irony of the real. The commercial is more real than the real because it hides nothing from its audience. It is capitalism at its best (worst?), having no shame or guilt about its process of stratification. It represents the truth of capitalist structures and uses it as irony for self-promotion. Many children will grow up following orders and exploited for their work so the commercial is indicative of current material relations, not their opposite. If capitalism is the mode of production, then postmodernism is its cultural logic and the two sometimes work together (Jameson 1991). An orthodox, economical analysis fails to account for the meaning in such representation, dismissing it as ideological. In another commercial, this time from "Jack-in-the-Box," the bulbous-headed Jack is found on the side of the road interacting with a Mexican woman serving food with *chipotle* peppers. Jack orders the food by mispronouncing the word several times, indeed mocking the woman, despite being corrected by her. In the end, the woman gives up trying. Again, at work here is an attempt at irony. Outside of the media's pretensions, this interaction happens frequently and would be branded as either racist or a form of cultural condescension. The commercial is brazenly real but works through the detour of irony, posturing as the opposite of the real.

I have argued that critical theory must work through the distortions of capital. As such, the act of reading becomes not only an exercise of representation, but a potentially transformative event (Freire 1993). Throughout this essay, I assessed the viability of both simulationist and socialist theories as modes of explanation for the postmodern condition. In addition, I evaluated their capacity to intervene into or resist with meaningful strategies relations of capital. Finally, the essay critiqued simulationism and socialism for their praxiological value. Clearly, Baudrillard's simulation theory of the hyperreal represents a unique innovation in social theory that challenges any universalist, transcendental explanation of the social. En route to its unpredictable ends, simulation theory pronounces the death of certain modernist themes, like production and depth, both of which link with Marxist discourse. Despite these formidable challenges to socialist epistemology, simulation theory falls short of a sustainable position because it denies the possibility of systematic

opposition since this would be tantamount to admitting that a system is currently in place. Socialist societies may not obliterate oppression once and for all, but a historical materialist critique is a process that attends to the conditions of exploitation as they historically appear. In a time of real as well as theoretical crisis, the promises of Marxism remain a potential, not a guarantee. It is not only attentive to language, but the language of concrete people. It takes discourse seriously but also constructs a discourse for transformation of reality. Despite the possibility that it may never realize a practical condition free of contradictions, Marxism is a discourse committed to ending human exploitation. In our current formation, Marxism's incessant critique of capitalism makes it one of the most stable threats in the unstable conditions of postmodernity.

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