

# Class Dismissed? Historical materialism and the politics of ‘difference’

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## Introduction

Perhaps one of the most taken-for-granted features of contemporary social theory is the ritual and increasingly generic critique of Marxism in terms of its alleged failure to address forms of oppression other than that of ‘class.’ Marxism is considered to be theoretically bankrupt and intellectually passé, and class analysis is often savagely lampooned as a rusty weapon wielded clumsily by those mind-locked in the jejune factories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When Marxist class analysis has not been distorted or equated with some crude version of ‘economic determinism,’ it has been attacked for diverting attention away from the categories of ‘difference’—including ‘race’ (Gimenez, 2001). To overcome the presumed inadequacies of Marxism, an entire discursive apparatus, sometimes called ‘post-Marxism’, has arisen to fill the void.

Serving as academic pallbearers at the funeral of the old bearded devil, post-Marxists (who often go by other names such as postmodernists, radical multiculturalists, etc.) have tried to entomb Marx’s legacy while simultaneously benefiting from it. Yet, the crypt designed for Marx, reverential in its grand austerity, has never quite been able to contain his impact on history. For someone presumably dead, Marx has a way of escaping from his final resting place and reappearing with an uncanny regularity in the world of ideas. His ghost, as Greider (1998) notes, ‘hovers over the global landscape’ as he continues to shape our understandings of the current crises of capitalism that haunt the living present. Regardless of Marx’s enduring relevance and even though much of post-Marxism is actually an outlandish ‘caricature’ of Marx and the entire Marxist tradition, it has eaten through the Left ‘like a cancer’ and has ‘established itself as the new common sense’ (Johnson, 2002, p. 129). What has been produced is a discourse eminently more digestible to the academic ‘Left’ whose steady embourgeoisement appears to be altering the political palate of career social theorists.

Eager to take a wide detour around political economy, post-Marxists tend to assume that the principal political points of departure in the current ‘postmodern’ world must necessarily be ‘cultural.’ As such, most, *but not all* post-Marxists have gravitated towards a politics of ‘difference’ which is largely premised on uncovering relations of power that reside in the arrangement and deployment of subjectivity in cultural and ideological practices (cf. Jordan & Weedon, 1995). Advocates of

'difference' politics therefore posit their ideas as bold steps forward in advancing the interests of those historically marginalized by 'dominant' social and cultural narratives.

There is no doubt that post-Marxism has advanced our knowledge of the hidden trajectories of power within the processes of representation and that it remains useful in adumbrating the formation of subjectivity and its expressive dimensions as well as complementing our understandings of the relationships between 'difference,' language, and cultural configurations. However, post-Marxists have been woefully remiss in addressing the constitution of class formations and the machinations of capitalist social organization. In some instances, capitalism and class relations have been thoroughly 'otherized;' in others, class is summoned only as part of the triumvirate of 'race, class, and gender' in which class is reduced to merely another form of 'difference.' Enamored with the 'cultural' and seemingly blind to the 'economic,' the rhetorical excesses of post-Marxists have also prevented them from considering the stark reality of contemporary class conditions under global capitalism. As we hope to show, the radical displacement of class analysis in contemporary theoretical narratives and the concomitant decentering of capitalism, the anointing of 'difference' as a primary explanatory construct, and the 'culturalization' of politics, have had detrimental effects on 'left' theory and practice.

### **Reconceptualizing 'Difference'**

The manner in which 'difference' has been taken up within 'post-al' frameworks has tended to stress its cultural dimensions while marginalizing and, in some cases, completely ignoring the *economic* and *material dimensions* of difference. This posturing has been quite evident in many 'post-al' theories of 'race' and in the realm of 'ludic'<sup>1</sup> cultural studies that have valorized an account of difference—particularly 'racial difference'—in almost exclusively 'superstructuralist' terms (Sahay, 1998). But this treatment of 'difference' and claims about 'the "relative autonomy" of "race"' have been 'enabled by a reduction and distortion of Marxian class analysis' which 'involves equating class analysis with some version of economic determinism.' The key move in this distorting gesture depends on the 'view that the economic is the base, the cultural/political/ideological the superstructure.' It is then 'relatively easy to show that the (presumably non-political) economic base does not cause the political/cultural/ideological superstructure, that the latter is/are not epiphenomenal but relatively autonomous or autonomous causal categories' (Meyerson, 2000, p. 2). In such formulations the 'cultural' is treated as a separate and autonomous sphere, severed from its embeddedness within sociopolitical and economic arrangements. As a result, many of these 'culturalist' narratives have produced autonomist and reified conceptualizations of difference which 'far from enabling those subjects most marginalized by racial difference' have, in effect, reduced 'difference to a question of knowledge/power relations' that can presumably be 'dealt with (negotiated) on a discursive level without a fundamental change in the relations of production' (Sahay, 1998).

At this juncture, it is necessary to point out that arguing that 'culture' is generally conditioned/shaped by material forces does not reinscribe the simplistic and presumably 'deterministic' base/superstructure metaphor which has plagued some strands of Marxist theory. Rather, we invoke Marx's own writings from both the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* in which he contends that there is a consolidating logic in the relations of production that permeates society in the complex variety of its 'empirical' reality. This emphasizes Marx's understanding of capitalism and capital as a 'social' relation—one which stresses the interpenetration of these categories, the realities which they reflect, and one which therefore offers a unified and dialectical analysis of history, ideology, culture, politics, economics and society (see also Marx, 1972, 1976, 1977).<sup>2</sup>

Foregrounding the limitations of 'difference' and 'representational' politics does not suggest a disavowal of the importance of cultural and/or discursive arena(s) as sites of contestation and struggle. We readily acknowledge the significance of contemporary theorizations that have sought to valorize precisely those forms of 'difference' that have historically been denigrated. This has undoubtedly been an important development since they have enabled subordinated groups to reconstruct their own histories and give voice to their individual and collective identities. However, they have also tended to redefine politics as a signifying activity generally confined to the realm of 'representation' while displacing a politics grounded in the mobilization of forces against the material sources of political and economic marginalization. In their rush to avoid the 'capital' sin of 'economism,' many post-Marxists (who often ignore their own class privilege) have fallen prey to an ahistorical form of culturalism which holds, among other things, that cultural struggles external to class organizing provide the cutting edge of emancipatory politics.<sup>3</sup> In many respects, this posturing, has yielded an 'intellectual pseudopolitics' that has served to empower 'the theorist while explicitly disempowering' real citizens (Turner, 1994, p. 410). We do not discount concerns over representation; rather our point is that progressive educators and theorists should not be straightjacketed by struggles that fail to move beyond the politics of difference and representation in the cultural realm. While space limitations prevent us from elaborating this point, we contend that culturalist arguments are deeply problematic both in terms of their penchant for de-emphasizing the totalizing (yes totalizing!) power and function of capital and for their attempts to employ culture as a construct that would diminish the centrality of class. In a proper historical materialist account, 'culture' is not the 'other' of class but, rather, constitutes part of a more comprehensive theorization of class rule in different contexts.<sup>4</sup>

'Post-al' theorizations of 'difference' circumvent and undermine any systematic knowledge of the material dimensions of difference and tend to segregate questions of 'difference' from class formation and capitalist social relations. We therefore believe that it is necessary to (re)conceptualize 'difference' by drawing upon Marx's materialist and historical formulations. 'Difference' needs to be understood as the product of social contradictions and in relation to political and economic organization. We need to acknowledge that 'otherness' and/or difference is not something that passively happens, but, rather, is actively produced. In other words, since

systems of differences almost always involve relations of domination and oppression, we must concern ourselves with the economies of relations of difference that exist in specific contexts. Drawing upon the Marxist concept of *mediation* enables us to unsettle our categorical approaches to both class and difference, for it was Marx himself who warned against creating false dichotomies in the situation of our politics—that it was absurd to ‘choose between consciousness and the world, subjectivity and social organization, personal or collective will and historical or structural determination.’ In a similar vein, it is equally absurd to see ‘difference as a historical form of consciousness unconnected to class formation, development of capital and class politics’ (Bannerji, 1995, p. 30). Bannerji points to the need to historicize ‘difference’ in relation to the history and social organization of capital and class (inclusive of imperialist and colonialist legacies). Apprehending the meaning and function of difference in this manner necessarily highlights the importance of exploring (1) the institutional and structural aspects of difference; (2) the meanings that get attached to categories of difference; and (3) how differences are produced out of, and lived within specific historical formations.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, it presents a challenge to those theorizations that work to consolidate ‘identitarian’ understandings of difference based exclusively on questions of cultural or racial hegemony. In such approaches, the answer to oppression often amounts to creating greater cultural space for the formerly excluded to have their voices heard (represented). In this regard, much of what is called the ‘politics of difference’ is little more than a demand for inclusion into the club of representation—a posture which reinscribes a neo-liberal pluralist stance rooted in the ideology of free-market capitalism. In short, the political sphere is modeled on the marketplace and freedom amounts to the liberty of all vendors to display their ‘different’ cultural goods. What advocates of this approach fail to address is that the forces of diversity and difference are allowed to flourish provided that they remain within the prevailing forms of capitalist social arrangements. The neo-pluralism of difference politics (including those based on ‘race’) cannot adequately pose a substantive challenge to the productive system of capitalism that is able to accommodate a vast pluralism of ideas and cultural practices, and cannot capture the ways in which various manifestations of oppression are intimately connected to the central dynamics of capitalist exploitation.

An historical materialist approach understands that categories of ‘difference’ are social/political constructs that are often encoded in dominant ideological formations and that they often play a role in ‘moral’ and ‘legal’ state-mediated forms of ruling. It also acknowledges the ‘material’ force of ideologies—particularly racist ideologies—that assign separate cultural and/or biological essences to different segments of the population which, in turn, serve to reinforce and rationalize existing relations of power. But more than this, an historical materialist understanding foregrounds the manner in which ‘difference’ is central to the exploitative production/reproduction dialectic of capital, its labor organization and processes, and in the way labor is valued and remunerated.

The real problem is the internal or dialectical relation that exists between capital and labor within the capitalist production process itself—a social relation in which

capitalism is intransigently rooted. This social relation—essential to the production of abstract labor—deals with how already existing value is preserved and new value (surplus value) is created (Allman, 2001). If, for example, the process of actual exploitation and the accumulation of surplus value is to be seen as a state of constant manipulation and as a realization process of concrete labor in actual labor time—within a given cost-production system and a labor market—we cannot underestimate the ways in which ‘difference’ (racial as well as gender difference) is encapsulated in the production/reproduction dialectic of capital. It is this relationship that is mainly responsible for the inequitable and unjust distribution of resources. A deepened understanding of this phenomenon is essential for understanding the emergence of an acutely polarized labor market and the fact that disproportionately high percentages of ‘people of color’ are trapped in the lower rungs of domestic and global labor markets (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 1999). ‘Difference’ in the era of global capitalism is crucial to the workings, movements and profit levels of multinational corporations but those types of complex relations cannot be mapped out by using truncated post-Marxist, culturalist conceptualizations of ‘difference.’ To sever issues of ‘difference’ from class conveniently draws attention away from the crucially important ways in which ‘people of color’ (and, more specifically, ‘women of color’) provide capital with its superexploited labor pools—a phenomenon that is on the rise all over the world. Most social relations constitutive of racialized differences are considerably shaped by the relations of production and there is undoubtedly a racialized and gendered division of labor whose severity and function vary depending on where one is situated in the capitalist global economy (Meyerson, 2000).<sup>6</sup>

In stating this, we need to include an important caveat that differentiates our approach from those invoking the well-worn race/class/gender triplet which can sound, to the uninitiated, both radical and vaguely Marxian. It is not. Race, class and gender, while they invariably intersect and interact, are not co-primary. This ‘triplet’ approximates what the ‘philosophers might call a category mistake.’ On the surface the triplet may be convincing—some people are oppressed because of their race, others as a result of their gender, yet others because of their class—but this ‘is grossly misleading’ for it is not that ‘some individuals manifest certain characteristics known as “class” which then results in their oppression; on the contrary, to be a member of a social class just *is* to be oppressed’ and in this regard class is ‘a wholly social category’ (Eagleton, 1998, p. 289). Furthermore, even though ‘class’ is usually invoked as part of the aforementioned and much vaunted triptych, it is usually gutted of its practical, social dimension or treated solely as a cultural phenomenon—as just another form of ‘difference.’ In these instances, class is transformed from an economic and, indeed, social category to an exclusively cultural or discursive one or one in which class merely signifies a ‘subject position.’ Class is therefore cut off from the political economy of capitalism and class power severed from exploitation and a power structure ‘in which those who control collectively produced resources only do so because of the value generated by those who do not’ (Hennessy & Ingraham, 1997, p. 2).

Such theorizing has had the effect of replacing an *historical materialist class analysis with a cultural analysis of class*. As a result, many post-Marxists have also stripped the idea of class of precisely that element which, for Marx, made it radical—namely its status as a universal form of exploitation whose abolition required (and was also central to) the abolition of all manifestations of oppression (Marx, 1978, p. 60). With regard to this issue, Kovel (2002) is particularly insightful, for he explicitly addresses an issue which continues to vex the Left—namely the priority given to different categories of what he calls ‘dominative splitting’—those categories of ‘gender, class, race, ethnic and national exclusion,’ etc. Kovel argues that we need to ask the question of *priority* with respect to what? He notes that if we mean priority with respect to *time*, then the category of gender would have priority since there are traces of gender oppression in all other forms of oppression. If we were to prioritize in terms of *existential significance*, Kovel suggests that we would have to depend upon the immediate historical forces that bear down on distinct groups of people—he offers examples of Jews in 1930s Germany who suffered from brutal forms of anti-Semitism and Palestinians today who experience anti-Arab racism under Israeli domination. The question of what has *political priority*, however, would depend upon which transformation of relations of oppression are practically more urgent and, while this would certainly depend upon the preceding categories, it would also depend upon the fashion in which all the forces acting in a concrete situation are deployed. As to the question of which split sets into motion all of the others, the priority would have to be given to *class* since class relations

entail the state as an instrument of enforcement and control, and it is the state that shapes and organizes the splits that appear in human ecosystems. Thus class is both logically and historically distinct from other forms of exclusion (hence we should not talk of ‘classism’ to go along with ‘sexism’ and ‘racism,’ and ‘species-ism’). This is, first of all, because class is an essentially man-made category, without root in even a mystified biology. We cannot imagine a human world without gender distinctions—although we can imagine a world without domination by gender. But a world without class is eminently imaginable—indeed, such was the human world for the great majority of our species’ time on earth, during all of which considerable fuss was made over gender. Historically, the difference arises because ‘class’ signifies one side of a larger figure that includes a state apparatus whose conquests and regulations create races and shape gender relations. Thus there will be no true resolution of racism so long as class society stands, inasmuch as a racially oppressed society implies the activities of a class-defending state. Nor can gender inequality be enacted away so long as class society, with its state, demands the super-exploitation of women’s labor. (Kovel, 2002, pp. 123–124)

Contrary to what many have claimed, Marxist theory does not relegate categories of ‘difference’ to the conceptual mausoleum; rather, it has sought to reanimate these categories by interrogating how they are refracted through material relations of power and privilege and linked to relations of production. Moreover, it has

emphasized and insisted that the wider political and economic system in which they are embedded needs to be thoroughly understood in all its complexity. Indeed, Marx made clear how constructions of race and ethnicity 'are implicated in the circulation process of variable capital.' To the extent that 'gender, race, and ethnicity are all understood as social constructions rather than as essentialist categories' the effect of exploring their insertion into the 'circulation of variable capital (including positioning within the internal heterogeneity of collective labor and hence, within the division of labor and the class system)' must be interpreted as a 'powerful force reconstructing them in distinctly capitalist ways' (Harvey, 2000, p. 106). Unlike contemporary narratives which tend to focus on one or another form of oppression, the irrefragable power of historical materialism resides in its ability to reveal (1) how forms of oppression based on categories of difference do not possess relative autonomy from class relations but rather constitute the ways in which oppression is lived/experienced within a class-based system; and (2) how all forms of social oppression function within an overarching capitalist system.

This framework must be further distinguished from those that invoke the terms 'classism' and/or 'class elitism' to (ostensibly) foreground the idea that 'class matters' (cf. hooks, 2000) since we agree with Gimenez (2001, p. 24) that 'class is not simply another ideology legitimating oppression.' Rather, class denotes 'exploitative relations between people mediated by their relations to the means of production.' To marginalize such a conceptualization of class is to conflate an individual's objective location in the intersection of structures of inequality with people's subjective understandings of who they really are based on their 'experiences.'

Another caveat. In making such a claim, we are not renouncing the concept of experience. On the contrary, we believe it is imperative to retain the category of lived experience as a reference point in light of misguided post-Marxist critiques which imply that *all* forms of Marxian class analysis are dismissive of subjectivity. We are not, however, advocating the uncritical fetishization of 'experience' that tends to assume that experience somehow guarantees the authenticity of knowledge and which often treats experience as self-explanatory, transparent, and solely individual. Rather, we advance a framework that seeks to make connections between seemingly isolated situations and/or particular experiences by exploring how they are constituted in, and circumscribed by, broader historical and social circumstances. Experiential understandings, in and of themselves, are suspect because, dialectically, they constitute a unity of opposites—they are at once unique, specific, and personal, but also thoroughly partial, social, and the products of historical forces about which individuals may know little or nothing (Gimenez, 2001). In this sense, a rich description of immediate experience in terms of consciousness of a particular form of oppression (racial or otherwise) can be an appropriate and indispensable point of departure. Such an understanding, however, can easily become an isolated 'difference' prison unless it transcends the immediate perceived point of oppression, confronts the social system in which it is rooted, and expands into a complex and multifaceted analysis (of forms of social mediation) that is capable of mapping out the general organization of social relations. That, however, requires a broad class-based approach.

Having a concept of class helps us to see the network of social relations constituting an overall social organization which both implicates and cuts through racialization/ethnicization and gender ... [a] radical political economy [class] perspective emphasizing exploitation, dispossession and survival takes the issues of ... diversity [and difference] beyond questions of conscious identity such as culture and ideology, or of a paradigm of homogeneity and heterogeneity ... or of ethical imperatives with respect to the 'other'. (Bannerji, 2000, pp. 7, 19)

A radical political economy framework is crucial since various 'culturalist' perspectives seem to diminish the role of political economy and class forces in shaping the edifice of 'the social'—including the shifting constellations and meanings of 'difference.' Furthermore, none of the 'differences' valorized in culturalist narratives alone, and certainly not 'race' by itself can explain the massive transformation of the structure of capitalism in recent years. We agree with Meyerson (2000) that 'race' is not an adequate explanatory category on its own and that the use of 'race' as a descriptive or analytical category has serious consequences for the way in which social life is presumed to be constituted and organized. The category of 'race'—the conceptual framework that the oppressed often employ to interpret their experiences of inequality 'often clouds the concrete reality of class, and blurs the actual structure of power and privilege.' In this regard, 'race' is all too often a 'barrier to understanding the central role of class in shaping personal and collective outcomes within a capitalist society' (Marable, 1995, pp. 8, 226). In many ways, the use of 'race' has become an analytical trap precisely when it has been employed in antiseptic isolation from the messy terrain of historical and material relations. This, of course, does not imply that we ignore racism and racial oppression; rather, an analytical shift from 'race' to a plural conceptualization of 'racisms' and their historical articulations is necessary (cf. McLaren & Torres, 1999). However, it is important to note that 'race' doesn't explain racism and forms of racial oppression. Those relations are best understood within the context of class rule, as Bannerji, Kovel, Marable and Meyerson imply—but that compels us to forge a conceptual shift in theorizing, which entails (among other things) moving beyond the ideology of 'difference' and 'race' as the dominant prisms for understanding exploitation and oppression. We are aware of some potential implications for white Marxist criticalists to unwittingly support racist practices in their criticisms of 'race-first' positions articulated in the social sciences. In those instances, white criticalists wrongly go on 'high alert' in placing theorists of color under special surveillance for downplaying an analysis of capitalism and class. These activities on the part of white criticalists must be condemned, as must be efforts to stress class analysis primarily as a means of creating a *white vanguard position* in the struggle against capitalism. Our position is one that attempts to link practices of racial oppression to the central, totalizing dynamics of capitalist society in order to resist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy more fully.<sup>7</sup>

We have argued that it is virtually impossible to conceptualize class without attending to the forms and contents of difference, but we insist that this does not

imply that class struggle is now outdated by the politics of difference. As Jameson (1998, p. 136) notes, we are now in the midst of returning to the 'most fundamental form of class struggle' in light of current global conditions. Today's climate suggests that class struggle is 'not yet a thing of the past' and that those who seek to undermine its centrality are not only 'morally callous' and 'seriously out of touch with reality' but also largely blind to the 'needs of the large mass of people who are barely surviving capital's newly-honed mechanisms of globalized greed' (Harvey, 1998, pp. 7–9). In our view, a more comprehensive and politically useful understanding of the contemporary historical juncture necessitates foregrounding class analysis and the primacy of the working class as the fundamental agent of change.<sup>8</sup>

This does not render as 'secondary' the concerns of those marginalized by race, ethnicity, etc. as is routinely charged by post-Marxists. It is often assumed that foregrounding capitalist social relations necessarily undermines the importance of attending to 'difference' and/or trivializes struggles against racism, etc., in favor of an abstractly defined class-based politics typically identified as 'white.' Yet, such formulations rest on a bizarre but generally unspoken logic that assumes that racial and ethnic 'minorities' are only conjuncturally related to the working class. This stance is patently absurd since the concept of the 'working class' is undoubtedly comprised of men and women of different races, ethnicities, etc. (Mitter, 1997). A good deal of post-Marxist critique is subtly racist (not to mention essentialist) insofar as it implies that 'people of color' could not possibly be concerned with issues beyond those related to their 'racial' or 'ethnic' 'difference.' This posits 'people of color' as single-minded, one-dimensional caricatures and assumes that their working lives are less crucial to their self-understanding (and survival) than is the case with their 'white male' counterparts.<sup>9</sup> It also ignores 'the fact that class is an ineradicable dimension of everybody's lives' (Gimenez, 2001, p. 2) and that social oppression is much more than tangentially linked to class background and the exploitative relations of production. On this topic, Meyerson (2000) is worth quoting at length:

Marxism properly interpreted emphasizes the primacy of class in a number of senses. One of course is the primacy of the working class as a revolutionary agent—a primacy which does not render women and people of color 'secondary.' This view assumes that 'working class' means white—this division between a white working class and all the others, whose identity (along with a corresponding social theory to explain that identity) is thereby viewed as either primarily one of gender and race or hybrid ... [T]he primacy of class means ... that building a multiracial, multi-gendered international working-class organization or organizations should be the goal of any revolutionary movement so that the primacy of class puts the fight against racism and sexism at the center. The intelligibility of this position is rooted in the explanatory primacy of class analysis for understanding the structural determinants of race, gender, and class oppression. Oppression is multiple and intersecting but its causes are not.

The cohesiveness of this position suggests that forms of exploitation and oppression are related internally to the extent that they are located in the same totality—one which is currently defined by capitalist class rule. Capitalism *is* an overarching totality that is, unfortunately, becoming increasingly invisible in post-Marxist ‘discursive’ narratives that valorize ‘difference’ as a primary explanatory construct.

For example, E. San Juan (2003) argues that race relations and race conflict are necessarily structured by the larger totality of the political economy of a given society, as well as by modifications in the structure of the world economy. He further notes that the capitalist mode of production has articulated ‘race’ with class in a peculiar way. He too is worth a substantial quotation:

While the stagnation of rural life imposed a racial or castelike rigidity to the peasantry, the rapid accumulation of wealth through the ever more intensifying exploitation of labor by capital could not so easily ‘racialize’ the wage-workers of a particular nation, given the alienability of labor-power—unless certain physical or cultural characteristics can be utilized to divide the workers or render one group an outcast or pariah removed from the domain of ‘free labor.’ In the capitalist development of U.S. society, African, Mexican, and Asian bodies—more precisely, their labor power and its reproductive efficacy—were colonized and racialized; hence the idea of ‘internal colonialism’ retains explanatory validity. ‘Race’ is thus constructed out of raw materials furnished by class relations, the history of class conflicts, and the vicissitudes of colonial/capitalist expansion and the building of imperial hegemony. It is dialectically accented and operationalized not just to differentiate the price of wage labor within and outside the territory of the metropolitan power, but also to reproduce relations of domination–subordination invested with an aura of naturality and fatality. The refunctioning of physical or cultural traits as ideological and political signifiers of class identity reifies social relations. Such ‘racial’ markers enter the field of the alienated labor process, concealing the artificial nature of meanings and norms, and essentializing or naturalizing historical traditions and values which are contingent on mutable circumstances.

For San Juan, racism and nationalism are modalities in which class struggles articulate themselves at strategic points in history. He argues that racism arose with the creation and expansion of the capitalist world economy. He maintains, rightly in our view, that racial or ethnic group solidarity is given ‘meaning and value in terms of their place within the social organization of production and reproduction of the ideological-political order; ideologies of racism as collective social evaluation of solidarities arise to reinforce structural constraints which preserve the exploited and oppressed position of these “racial” solidarities’.

It is remarkable, in our opinion, that so much of contemporary social theory has largely abandoned the problems of labor, capitalist exploitation, and class analysis at a time when capitalism is becoming more universal, more ruthless and more deadly. The metaphor of a contemporary ‘tower of Babel’ seems appropriate

here—academics striking radical poses in the seminar rooms while remaining oblivious to the possibility that their seemingly radical discursive maneuvers do nothing to further the struggles ‘against oppression and exploitation which continue to be real, material, and not merely “discursive” problems of the contemporary world’ (Dirlik, 1997, p. 176). Harvey (1998, pp. 29–31) indicts the new academic entrepreneurs, the ‘masters of theory-in-and-for-itself’ whose ‘discourse radicalism’ has deftly side-stepped ‘the enduring conundrums of class struggle’ and who have, against a ‘sobering background of cheapened discourse and opportunistic politics,’ been ‘stripped of their self-advertised radicalism.’ For years, they ‘contested socialism,’ ridiculed Marxists, and promoted ‘their own alternative theories of liberatory politics’ but now they have largely been ‘reduced to the role of supplicants in the most degraded form of pluralist politics imaginable.’ As they pursue the politics of difference, the ‘class war rages unabated’ and they seem ‘either unwilling or unable to focus on the unprecedented economic carnage occurring around the globe.’

Harvey’s searing criticism suggests that post-Marxists have been busy fiddling while Rome burns and his comments echo those made by Marx (1978, p. 149) in his critique of the Young Hegelians who were, ‘in spite of their allegedly “world-shattering” statements, the staunchest conservatives.’ Marx lamented that the Young Hegelians were simply fighting ‘phrases’ and that they failed to acknowledge that in offering only counter-phrases, they were in no way ‘combating the real existing world’ but merely combating the phrases of the world. Taking a cue from Marx and substituting ‘phrases’ with ‘discourses’ or ‘resignifications’ we would contend that the practitioners of difference politics who operate within exaggerated culturalist frameworks that privilege the realm of representation as the primary arena of political struggle question some discourses of power while legitimating others. Moreover, because they lack a class perspective, their gestures of radicalism are belied by their own class positions.<sup>10</sup> As Ahmad (1997a, p. 104) notes:

One may speak of any number of disorientations and even oppressions, but one cultivates all kinds of politeness and indirection about the structure of capitalist class relations in which those oppressions are embedded. To speak of any of that directly and simply is to be ‘vulgar.’ In this climate of Aesopian languages it is absolutely essential to reiterate that most things *are* a matter of class. That kind of statement is ... surprising only in a culture like that of the North American university ... But it is precisely in that kind of culture that people need to hear such obvious truths.

Ahmad’s provocative observations imply that substantive analyses of the carnage wrought by ‘globalized’ class exploitation have, for the most part, been marginalized by the kind of radicalism that has been instituted among the academic Left in North America. He further suggests that while various post-Marxists have invited us to join their euphoric celebrations honoring the decentering of capitalism, the abandonment of class politics, and the decline of metanarratives (particularly those of Marxism and socialism), they have failed to see that the most ‘meta of all metanarratives of the past three centuries, the creeping annexation of the globe

for the dominance of capital over laboring humanity has met, during those same decades, with stunning success' (Ahmad, 1997b, p. 364). As such, Ahmad invites us to ask anew, the proverbial question: What, then, must be done? To this question we offer no simple theoretical, pedagogical or political prescriptions. Yet we would argue that if social change is the aim, progressive educators and theorists must cease displacing class analysis with the politics of difference.

## Conclusion

... we will take our stand against the evils [of capitalism, imperialism, and racism] with a solidarity derived from a proletarian internationalism born of socialist idealism.

—National Office of the Black Panther Party, February 1970

For well over two decades we have witnessed the jubilant liberal and conservative pronouncements of the demise of socialism. Concomitantly, history's presumed failure to defang existing capitalist relations has been read by many self-identified 'radicals' as an advertisement for capitalism's inevitability. As a result, the chorus refrain 'There Is No Alternative', sung by liberals and conservatives, has been buttressed by the symphony of post-Marxist voices recommending that we give socialism a decent burial and move on. Within this context, to speak of the promise of Marx and socialism may appear anachronistic, even naïve, especially since the post-al intellectual vanguard has presumably demonstrated the folly of doing so. Yet we stubbornly believe that the chants of T.I.N.A. must be combated for they offer as a *fait accompli*, something which progressive Leftists should refuse to accept—namely the triumph of capitalism and its political bedfellow neo-liberalism, which have worked together to naturalize suffering, undermine collective struggle, and obliterate hope. We concur with Amin (1998), who claims that such chants must be defied and revealed as absurd and criminal, and who puts the challenge we face in no uncertain terms: humanity may let itself be led by capitalism's logic to a fate of collective suicide or it may pave the way for an alternative humanist project of global socialism.

The grotesque conditions that inspired Marx to pen his original critique of capitalism are present and flourishing. The inequalities of wealth and the gross imbalances of power that exist today are leading to abuses that exceed those encountered in Marx's day (Greider, 1998, p. 39). Global capitalism has paved the way for the obscene concentration of wealth in fewer and fewer hands and created a world increasingly divided between those who enjoy opulent affluence and those who languish in dehumanizing conditions and economic misery. In every corner of the globe, we are witnessing social disintegration as revealed by a rise in abject poverty and inequality. At the current historical juncture, the combined assets of the 225 richest people is roughly equal to the annual income of the poorest 47 percent of the world's population, while the combined assets of the three richest people exceed the combined GDP of the 48 poorest nations (CCPA, 2002, p. 3). Approximately 2.8 billion people—almost half of the world's population—struggle

in desperation to live on less than two dollars a day (McQuaig, 2001, p. 27). As many as 250 million children are wage slaves and there are over a billion workers who are either un- or under-employed. These are the concrete realities of our time—realities that require a vigorous class analysis, an unrelenting critique of capitalism and an oppositional politics capable of confronting what Ahmad (1998, p. 2) refers to as ‘capitalist universality.’ They are realities that require something more than that which is offered by the prophets of ‘difference’ and post-Marxists who would have us relegate socialism to the scrapheap of history and mummify Marxism along with Lenin’s corpse. Never before has a Marxian analysis of capitalism and class rule been so desperately needed. That is not to say that everything Marx said or anticipated has come true, for that is clearly not the case. Many critiques of Marx focus on his strategy for moving toward socialism, and with ample justification; nonetheless Marx did provide us with fundamental insights into class society that have held true to this day. Marx’s enduring relevance lies in his indictment of capitalism which continues to wreak havoc in the lives of most. While capitalism’s cheerleaders have attempted to hide its sordid underbelly, Marx’s description of capitalism as the sorcerer’s dark power is even more apt in light of contemporary historical and economic conditions. Rather than jettisoning Marx, decentering the role of capitalism, and discrediting class analysis, radical educators must continue to engage Marx’s *oeuvre* and extrapolate from it that which is useful pedagogically, theoretically, and, most importantly, politically in light of the challenges that confront us.

The urgency which animates Amin’s call for a collective socialist vision necessitates, as we have argued, moving beyond the particularism and liberal pluralism that informs the ‘politics of difference.’ It also requires challenging the questionable assumptions that have come to constitute the core of contemporary ‘radical’ theory, pedagogy and politics. In terms of effecting change, what is needed is a cogent understanding of the systemic nature of exploitation and oppression based on the precepts of a radical political economy approach (outlined above) and one that incorporates Marx’s notion of ‘unity in difference’ in which people share widely common material interests. Such an understanding extends far beyond the realm of theory, for the manner in which we choose to interpret and explore the social world, the concepts and frameworks we use to express our sociopolitical understandings, are more than just abstract categories. They imply intentions, organizational practices, and political agendas. Identifying class analysis as the basis for our understandings and class struggle as the basis for political transformation implies something quite different than constructing a sense of political agency around issues of race, ethnicity, gender, etc. Contrary to ‘Shakespeare’s assertion that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet,’ it should be clear that this is not the case in political matters. Rather, in politics ‘the essence of the flower lies in the name by which it is called’ (Bannerji, 2000, p. 41).

The task for progressives today is to seize the moment and plant the seeds for a political agenda that is grounded in historical possibilities and informed by a vision committed to overcoming exploitative conditions. These seeds, we would argue, must be derived from the tree of radical political economy. For the vast majority

of people today—people of all ‘racial classifications or identities, all genders and sexual orientations’—the common frame of reference arcing across ‘difference’, the ‘concerns and aspirations that are most widely shared are those that are rooted in the common experience of everyday life shaped and constrained by political economy’ (Reed, 2000, p. xxvii). While post-Marxist advocates of the politics of ‘difference’ suggest that such a stance is outdated, we would argue that the categories which they have employed to analyze ‘the social’ are now losing their usefulness, particularly in light of actual contemporary ‘social movements.’ All over the globe, there are large anti-capitalist movements afoot. In February 2002, chants of ‘Another World Is Possible’ became the theme of protests in Porto Alegre. It seems that those people struggling in the streets haven’t read about T.I.N.A., the end of grand narratives of emancipation, or the decentering of capitalism. It seems as though the struggle for basic survival and some semblance of human dignity in the mean streets of the dystopian metropolises doesn’t permit much time or opportunity to read the heady proclamations emanating from seminar rooms. As E. P. Thompson (1978, p. 11) once remarked, sometimes ‘experience walks in without knocking at the door, and announces deaths, crises of subsistence, trench warfare, unemployment, inflation, genocide.’ This, of course, does not mean that socialism will inevitably come about, yet a sense of its nascent promise animates current social movements. Indeed, noted historian Howard Zinn (2000, p. 20) recently pointed out that after years of single-issue organizing (i.e. the politics of difference), the WTO and other anti-corporate capitalist protests signaled a turning point in the ‘history of movements of recent decades,’ for it was the issue of ‘class’ that more than anything ‘bound everyone together.’ History, to paraphrase Thompson (1978, p. 25) doesn’t seem to be following Theory’s script.

Our vision is informed by Marx’s historical materialism and his revolutionary socialist humanism, which must not be conflated with liberal humanism. For left politics and pedagogy, a socialist humanist vision remains crucial, whose fundamental features include the creative potential of people to challenge collectively the circumstances that they inherit. This variant of humanism seeks to give expression to the pain, sorrow and degradation of the oppressed, those who labor under the ominous and ghastly cloak of ‘globalized’ capital. It calls for the transformation of those conditions that have prevented the bulk of humankind from fulfilling its potential. It vests its hope for change in the development of critical consciousness and social agents who make history, although not always in conditions of their choosing. The political goal of socialist humanism is, however, ‘not a resting in difference’ but rather ‘the emancipation of difference at the level of human mutuality and reciprocity.’ This would be a step forward for the ‘discovery or creation of our real differences which can only in the end be explored in reciprocal ways’ (Eagleton, 1996, p. 120). Above all else, the enduring relevance of a radical socialist pedagogy and politics is the centrality it accords to the interrogation of capitalism.

We can no longer afford to remain indifferent to the horror and savagery committed by capitalist’s barbaric machinations. We need to recognize that capitalist democracy is unrescuably contradictory in its own self-constitution. Capitalism

and democracy cannot be translated into one another without profound efforts at manufacturing empty idealism. Committed Leftists must unrelentingly cultivate a democratic socialist vision that refuses to forget the ‘wretched of the earth,’ the children of the damned and the victims of the culture of silence—a task which requires more than abstruse convolutions and striking ironic poses in the agnostic arena of signifying practices. Leftists must illuminate the little shops of horror that lurk beneath ‘globalization’s’ shiny façade; they must challenge the true ‘evils’ that are manifest in the tentacles of global capitalism’s reach. And, more than this, Leftists must search for the cracks in the edifice of globalized capitalism and shine light on those fissures that give birth to alternatives. Socialism today, undoubtedly, runs against the grain of received wisdom, but its vision of a vastly improved and freer arrangement of social relations beckons on the horizon. Its unwritten text is nascent in the present even as it exists among the fragments of history and the shards of distant memories. Its potential remains untapped and its promise needs to be redeemed.

## Notes

This essay is a revised version of Valerie Scatamburlo-D’Annibale and Peter McLaren, ‘The Strategic Centrality of Class in the Politics of “Race” and “Difference”’ that appeared in *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies*, 3:2 (May 2003), 148–175.

1. See Ebert (1996) for a discussion of ‘ludic’ theory.
2. Hence, while the charge of determinism may be appropriately lodged against some Marxists, when such a charge is leveled at Marx, ‘it is patently unjust’ (Amin, 1998, p. 138).
3. There exists a marked distinction between underscoring the importance of culture and the rhetoric of culturalism, which not only reduces everything to questions of culture but also has a reductionist conception of culture.
4. See Scatamburlo-D’Annibale & Langman, 2002.
5. As Marx (1978, p. 207) noted in his discussion of wage labor, capital and slavery: ‘[A] Negro [*sic*] is a “man of the black race.”’ ‘A Negro is a Negro. He only becomes a slave in certain relations.’
6. As Stabile (1997, pp. 142–143) notes: ‘historical material analyses, instead of examining only one form of oppression—like sexism, racism, or homophobia—would explore the way they all function within the overarching system of class domination ... Sweatshop workers in New York City, for example, experience sexism and racism in quantitatively and qualitatively different ways than do middle-class women. The racism directed at poor African American youths occurs in a different context than that directed at African American women in the academy. This is not to claim that the latter forms of oppression do not exist or are inconsequential, but by situating both forms within the material context and historical framework in which they occur, we can highlight the variable discriminating mechanisms that are central to capitalism as a system’.
7. Our point is that work which has attempted to remove the concept of racial oppression from the organ of social control exercised by state power on behalf of white capitalist class interests is problematic. See Allen, 1998.
8. It is important to note that arguing that the working-class is the fundamental agent of change is not the same as suggesting that it is the *only* agent of change.
9. It also ignores a lengthy history of Black ‘working class’ struggle.
10. See also Adolph Reed’s (2000) stinging critique of the ‘new’ Black ‘public intellectuals.’

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