

Merely Cultural

I propose to consider two different kinds of claims that have circulated recently, representing a culmination of sentiment that has been building for some time.¹ One has to do with an explicitly Marxist objection to the reduction of Marxist scholarship and activism to the study of culture, sometimes understood as the reduction of Marxism to cultural studies. The second has to do with the tendency to relegate new social movements to the sphere of the cultural, indeed, to dismiss them as being preoccupied with what is called the ‘merely’ cultural, and then to construe this cultural politics as factionalizing, identitarian, and particularistic. If I fail to give the names of those I take to hold these views, I hope that I will be forgiven. The active cultural presumption of this essay is that we utter and hear such views, that they form some part of the debates that populate the intellectual landscape within progressive intellectual circles. I presume as well that to link individuals to such views runs the risk of deflecting attention from the meaning and effect of such views to the pettier politics of who said what, and who said what back—a form of cultural politics that, for the moment, I want to resist.

These are some of the forms that this kind of argument has taken in the last year: that the cultural focus of left politics has abandoned the materialist project of Marxism, that it fails to address questions of economic equity and redistribution, that it fails as well to situate culture in terms of a systematic understanding of social and economic modes of production; that the cultural focus of left politics has splintered the Left into identitarian sects, that we have lost a set of common ideals and goals, a sense of a common history, a common set of values, a common language and even an objective and universal mode of rationality; that the cultural focus of left politics substitutes a self-centred and trivial form of politics that focuses on transient events, practices, and objects rather than offering a more robust, serious and comprehensive vision of the systematic interrelatedness of social and economic conditions.

Clearly, one more or less implicit presumption in some of these arguments is the notion that poststructuralism has thwarted Marxism, and that any ability to offer *systematic* accounts of social life or to assert norms of rationality—whether objective, universal, or both—is now seriously hampered by a poststructuralism that has entered the field of cultural politics, where that poststructuralism is construed as destructive, relativistic and politically paralyzing.

Parody as a Form of Identification

Perhaps you are already wondering how it is that I might take the time to rehearse these arguments in this way, giving them air-time, as it were, and perhaps you are also wondering whether or not I am already parodying these positions. Do I think that they are worthless, or do I think that they are important, deserving of a response? If I were parodying these positions, that might imply that I think that they are ridiculous, hollow, formulaic, that they have a generalizability and currency as discourse that allows for them to be taken up by almost anyone and to sound convincing, even if delivered by the most improbable person.

But what if my rehearsal involves a temporary identification with them, even as I myself participate in the cultural politics under attack? Is that temporary identification that I perform, the one that raises the question of whether I am involved in a parody of these positions, not precisely a moment in which, for better or worse, they become my position?

It is, I would argue, impossible to perform a convincing parody of an intellectual position without having a prior affiliation with what one parodies, without having and wanting an intimacy with the position one takes in or on as the object of parody. Parody requires a certain ability to identify, approximate, and draw near; it engages an intimacy with the position it appropriates that troubles the voice, the bearing, the perform-

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ativity of the subject such that the audience or the reader does not quite know where it is you stand, whether you have gone over to the other side, whether you remain on your side, whether you can rehearse that other position without falling prey to it in the midst of the performance. You might conclude, she is not being serious at all, or you might conclude that this is some sort of deconstructive play, and resolve to look elsewhere to find a serious discussion. But I would invite you to enter into this apparent wavering of mine, if you will, because I think that it actually serves the purposes of overcoming unnecessary divisions on the Left, and that is part of my purpose here.

I want to suggest that the recent efforts to parody the cultural Left could not have happened if there were not this prior affiliation and intimacy, and that to enter into parody is to enter into a relationship of both desire and ambivalence. In the hoax of last year, we saw a peculiar form of identification at work, one in which the one who performs the parody aspires, quite literally, to occupy the place of the one parodied, not only to expose the cultural icons of the cultural Left, *but to acquire and appropriate that very iconicity*, and, hence, to open oneself happily to public exposure as the one who performed the exposure, thus occupying both positions in the parody, territorializing the position of that other and acquiring temporary cultural fame.² Thus, it cannot be said that the purpose of the parody is not to denounce the way in which left politics had become media-driven or media-centred, degraded by the popular and the cultural, but, rather, precisely to enter into and drive the media, to become popular, and to triumph in the very cultural terms that have been acquired by those one seeks to demean, thus reconfirming and embodying the values of popularity and media success that goad the critique to begin with. Consider the thrilling sadism, the release of pent-up resentment at the moment of occupying the popular field that is apparently deplored as an object of analysis, paying tribute to the power of one's opponent, thus reinvigorating the very idealization that one sought to dismantle.

Thus, the result of parody is paradoxical: the gleeful sense of triumph indulged by the avatars of an ostensibly more serious Marxism about their moment in the cultural limelight exemplifies and symptomatizes precisely the cultural object of critique they oppose; the sense of triumph over this enemy, which cannot take place without in some eerie way taking the very place of the enemy, raises the question of whether the aims and goals of this more serious Marxism have not become hopelessly displaced onto a cultural domain, producing *a transient* object of media attention in the place of a more systematic analysis of economic and social relations. This sense of triumph reinscribes *a factionalization* within the Left at the very moment in which welfare rights are being abolished in this country, class differentials are intensifying across the globe, and the right wing in this country has successfully gained the ground of the 'middle' effectively making the Left itself invisible within the media. When does it appear on the front page of the *New York Times*, except on

² The hoax referred to is Alan D. Sokal, 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity', *Social Text*, nos. 46-7, Spring/Summer 1996, pp. 217-52.

that rare occasion in which one part of the Left swipes at another, producing a spectacle of the Left for mainstream liberal and conservative press consumption which is all too happy to discount every and any faction of the Left within the political process, much less honour the Left of any kind as a strong force in the service of radical social change?

Is the attempt to separate Marxism from the study of culture and to rescue critical knowledge from the shoals of cultural specificity simply a turf war between left cultural studies and more orthodox forms of Marxism? How is this attempted separation related to the claim that new social movements have split the Left, deprived us of common ideals, factionalized the field of knowledge and political activism, reducing political activism to the mere assertion and affirmation of cultural identity? The charge that new social movements are 'merely cultural', that a unified and progressive Marxism must return to a materialism based in an objective analysis of class, itself presumes that the distinction between material and cultural life is a stable one. And this recourse to an apparently stable distinction between material and cultural life is clearly the resurgence of a theoretical anachronism, one that discounts the contributions to Marxist theory since Althusser's displacement of the base-superstructure model, as well as various forms of cultural materialism—for instance, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Indeed, the untimely resurgence of that distinction is in the service of a tactic which seeks to identify new social movements with the merely cultural, and the cultural with the derivative and secondary, thus embracing an anachronistic materialism as the banner for a new orthodoxy.

Orthodox Unity

This resurgence of left orthodoxy calls for a 'unity' that would, paradoxically, redivide the Left in precisely the way that orthodoxy purports to lament. Indeed, one way of producing this division becomes clear when we ask which movements, and for what reasons, get relegated to the sphere of the merely cultural, and how that very division between the material and the cultural becomes tactically invoked for the purposes of marginalizing certain forms of political activism? And how does the new orthodoxy on the Left work in tandem with a social and sexual conservatism that seeks to make questions of race and sexuality secondary to the 'real' business of politics, producing a new and eerie political formation of neo-conservative Marxisms.

On what principles of exclusion or subordination has this ostensible unity been erected? How quickly we forget that new social movements based on democratic principles became articulated against a hegemonic Left as well as a complicitous liberal centre and a truly threatening right wing? Have the historical reasons for the development of semi-autonomous new social movements ever really been taken into account by those who now lament their emergence and credit them with narrow identitarian interests? Is this situation not simply reproduced in the recent efforts to restore the universal through fiat, whether through the imaginary finesse of Habermasian rationality or notions of the common good that prioritize a racially cleansed notion of class? Is the point of the new rhetorics of unity not simply to 'include' through domestication and

subordination precisely those movements that formed in part in opposition to such domestication and subordination, showing that the proponents of the 'common good' have failed to read the history that has made this conflict possible?

What the resurgent orthodoxy may resent about new social movements is precisely the vitality that such movements are enjoying. Paradoxically, the very movements that continue to keep the Left alive are credited with its paralysis. Although I would agree that a narrowly identitarian construal of such movements leads to a narrowing of the political field, *there is no reason to assume that such social movements are reducible to their identitarian formations*. The problem of unity or, more modestly, of solidarity cannot be resolved through the transcendence or obliteration of this field, and certainly not through the vain promise of retrieving a unity wrought through exclusions, one that reinstates subordination as the condition of its own possibility. The only possible unity will not be the synthesis of a set of conflicts, but will be *a mode of sustaining conflict in politically productive ways*, a practice of contestation that demands that these movements articulate their goals under the pressure of each other without therefore exactly becoming each other.

This is not quite the chain of equivalence proposed by Laclau and Mouffe, although it does sustain important relations to it.³ New political formations do not stand in an analogical relation with one another, as if they were discrete and differentiated entities. They are overlapping, mutually determining, and convergent fields of politicization. In fact, most promising are those moments in which one social movement comes to find its condition of possibility in another. Here difference is not simply the *external* differences between movements, understood as that which differentiates them from one another but, rather, *the self-difference of movement itself*, a constitutive rupture that makes movements possible on non-identitarian grounds, that installs a certain mobilizing conflict as the basis of politicization. Factionalization, understood as the process whereby one identity excludes another in order to fortify its own unity and coherence, makes the mistake of locating the problem of difference as that which emerges *between* one identity and another; but difference is the condition of possibility of identity or, rather, its constitutive limit: what makes its articulation possible at the same time what makes any final or closed articulation possible.

Within the academy, the effort to separate race studies from sexuality studies from gender studies marks various needs for autonomous articulation, but it also invariably produces a set of important, painful, and promising confrontations that expose the ultimate limits to any such autonomy: the politics of sexuality within African-American studies, the politics of race within queer studies, within the study of class, within feminism, the question of misogyny within any of the above, the question of homophobia within feminism, to name a few. This may seem to be precisely the tedium of identitarian struggles that a new, more inclusive Left hopes to transcend. And yet, for a politics of 'inclusion' to mean

³ See my dialogue on equality with Ernesto Laclau, in *Diacritics*, no. 27, Spring 1997, pp. 3-12.

something other than the redomestication and resubordination of such differences, it will have to develop a sense of alliance in the course of a new form of conflictual encounter. When new social movements are cast as so many 'particularisms' in search of an overarching universal, it will be necessary to ask how the rubric of a universal itself only became possible through the erasure of the prior workings of social power. This is not to say that universals are impossible, but rather that they become possible only through an abstraction from its location in power that will always be falsifying and territorializing, and calls to be resisted at every level. Whatever universal becomes possible—and it may be that universals only become possible for a time, 'flashing up' in Benjamin's sense—will be the result of a difficult labour of translation in which social movements offer up their points of convergence against a background of ongoing social contestation.

To fault new social movements for their vitality, as some have done, is precisely to refuse to understand that any future for the Left will have to build on the basis of movements that compel democratic participation, and that any effort to impose unity upon such movements from the outside will be rejected once again as a form of vanguardism dedicated to the production of hierarchy and dissension, producing the very factionalization that it asserts is coming from outside itself.

Queer Politics and the Disparagement of the Cultural

The nostalgia for a false and exclusionary unity is linked to the disparagement of the cultural, and with a renewed sexual and social conservatism on the Left. Sometimes this takes the form of trying to resubordinate race to class, failing to consider what Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall have argued, that race may be one modality in which class is lived. In this way, race and class are rendered distinct analytically only to realize that the analysis of the one cannot proceed without the analysis of the other. A different dynamic is at work in relation to sexuality, and I propose to concentrate the rest of this essay to that issue. Considered inessential to what is most pressing in material life, *queer politics is regularly figured by the orthodoxy as the cultural extreme of politicization.*

Whereas class and race struggles are understood as pervasively economic, and feminist struggles to be sometimes economic and sometimes cultural, queer struggles are understood not only to be cultural struggles, but to typify the 'merely cultural' form that contemporary social movements have assumed. Consider the recent work of a colleague, Nancy Fraser, whose views are in no way orthodox, and who has, on the contrary, sought to find ways to offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the interlocking relationship of emancipatory struggles of various kinds. I turn to her work in part because the assumption I worry about can be found there, and because she and I have a history of friendly argumentation, one which I trust will continue from here as a productive exchange—which is also the reason why she remains the only person I agree to name in this essay.⁴

⁴ See Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser, eds, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, New York 1994.

In Fraser's recent book, *Justice Interruptus*, she rightly notes that 'in the United States today, the expression 'identity politics' is increasingly used as a derogatory term for feminism, anti-racism, and anti-heterosexism.'⁵ She insists that such movements have everything to do with social justice, and argues that any left movement must respond to their challenges. Nevertheless, she reproduces the division that locates certain oppressions as part of political economy, and relegates others to the exclusively cultural sphere. Positing a spectrum that spans political economy and culture, she situates lesbian and gay struggles at the cultural end of this political spectrum. Homophobia, she argues, has no roots in political economy, because homosexuals occupy no distinctive position in the division of labour, are distributed throughout the class structure, and do not constitute an exploited class: 'the injustice they suffer is quintessentially a matter of recognition', thus making their struggles into a matter of cultural recognition, rather than a material oppression.⁶

Why would a movement concerned to criticize and transform the ways in which sexuality is socially regulated not be understood as central to the functioning of political economy? Indeed, that this critique and transformation is central to the project of materialism was the trenchant point made by socialist feminists and those interested in the convergence of Marxism and psychoanalysis in the 1970s and 1980s, and was clearly inaugurated by Engels and Marx with their own insistence that 'mode of production' needed to include forms of social association. In *The German Ideology* (1846), Marx famously wrote, 'men, who daily remake their own life, begin to make other men, to propagate their kind: the relation between man and woman, parents and children, the *family*.'⁷ Although Marx vacillates between regarding procreation as a natural and a social relationship, he makes clear not only that a mode of production is always combined with a mode of cooperation, but that, importantly, 'a mode of production is itself a "productive force".'⁸ Engels clearly expands upon this argument in *The Origin of Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), and offers there a formulation that became, for a time, perhaps the most widely cited quotation in socialist-feminist scholarship:

According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This, again, is of a twofold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing, and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species.⁹

Indeed, many of the feminist arguments during that time sought not

⁵ Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interrupts*, London 1997.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18; for another statement of these views, see Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a "Post-Socialist" Age', *NLR* 212, July-August 1995, pp. 68-93.

⁷ Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, New York 1978, p. 157.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Frederick Engels, 'Preface to the First Edition', *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, New York 1981, pp. 71-2. Engels continues in this paragraph to note how societies develop from a stage in which they are dominated by kinship to ones in which

only to identify the family as part of the mode of production, but to show how the very production of gender had to be understood as part of the 'production of human beings themselves,' according to norms that reproduced the heterosexually normative family. Thus, psychoanalysis entered as one way of showing how kinship operated to reproduce persons in social forms that served the interest of capital. Although some participants in those debates ceded the territory of kinship to Lévi-Strauss and to that theory's Lacanian successors, still others maintained that a specifically social account of the family was needed to explain the sexual division of labour and the gendered reproduction of the worker. Essential to the socialist-feminist position of the time was precisely the view that the family is not a natural given, and that as a specific social arrangement of kin functions, it remained historically contingent and, in principle, transformable. The scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s sought to establish the sphere of sexual reproduction as part of the material conditions of life, a proper and constitutive feature of political economy. It also sought to show how the reproduction of gendered persons, of 'men' and 'women' depended on the social regulation of the family and, indeed, on the reproduction of the heterosexual family as a site for the reproduction of heterosexual persons, fit for entry into the family as social form. Indeed, the presumption became, in the work of Gayle Rubin and others, that the normative reproduction of gender was essential to the reproduction of heterosexuality and the family. Thus, the sexual division of labour could not be understood apart from the reproduction of gendered persons, and psychoanalysis usually entered as a way of understanding the psychic trace of that social organization, and the ways in which that regulation appeared in sexual desires. Thus, the regulation of sexuality was systematically tied to *the mode of production* proper to the functioning of political economy.

Material Exclusion

Note that both 'gender' and 'sexuality' become part of 'material life' not only because of the way in which it serves the sexual division of labour, but also because normative gender serves the reproduction of the normative family. The point here is that, contra Fraser, struggles to transform the social field of sexuality do not become central to political economy to the extent that they can be directly tied to questions of unpaid and exploited labour, but also because they cannot be understood without an expansion of the 'economic' sphere itself to include both the reproduction of goods as well as the social reproduction of persons. Given the socialist-feminist effort to understand how the reproduction of persons and the social regulation of sexuality were part of the very

they are dominated by the state, and in this latter development, kinship becomes subsumed by the state. It is interesting to note the convergence of this argument with Foucault's remarks in *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1* (trans. Robert Hurley, New York 1978), where he argues the following: 'Particularly from the eighteenth century onwards, Western societies created and deployed a new apparatus which was superimposed upon the previous one.' (p. 106) Kinship determines sexuality in the ostensibly earlier form, one which Foucault characterizes as 'a system of alliance' (p. 107), and continues to support a newer organization of 'sexuality' even as the latter maintains some autonomy from that earlier one. For an extended discussion of this relation, see the interview I conducted with Gayle Rubin, 'Sexual Traffic', in *differences*, vol. 6, nos. 2-3, Summer-Fall 1994, pp. 62-97.

process of production and, hence, part of the ‘materialist conception’ of political economy, how is it that suddenly when the focus of critical analysis turns from the question of how normative sexuality is reproduced to the queer question of how that very normativity is confounded by the non-normative sexualities it harbours within its own terms—as well as the sexualities that thrive and suffer outside those terms—that the link between such an analysis and the mode of production is suddenly dropped? Is it only a matter of cultural recognition when non-normative sexualities are marginalized and debased? And is it possible to distinguish, even analytically, between a lack of cultural recognition and a material oppression, when the very definition of legal ‘personhood’ is rigorously circumscribed by cultural norms that are indissociable from their material effects? For example, in those instances in which lesbians and gays are excluded from state-sanctioned notions of the family (which is, according to both tax and property law, an economic unit); stopped at the border, deemed inadmissible to citizenship; selectively denied the status of freedom of speech and freedom of assembly; are denied the right (as members of the military) to speak his or her desire; or are deauthorized by law to make emergency medical decisions about one’s dying lover, to receive the property of one’s dead lover, to receive from the hospital the body of one’s dead lover—do not these examples mark the ‘holy family’ once again constraining the routes by which property interests are regulated and distributed? Is this simply the circulation of vilifying cultural attitudes or do such disenfranchisements mark a specific operation of the sexual and gendered distribution of legal and economic entitlements?

If one continues to take the mode of production as the defining structure of political economy, then surely it would make no sense for feminists to dismiss the hard-won insight that sexuality must be understood as part of that mode of production. But even if one takes the ‘redistribution’ of rights and goods as the defining moment of political economy, as Fraser does, how is it we might fail to recognize how these operations of homophobia are central to the functioning of political economy? Given the distribution of health care in this country, is it really possible to say that gay people do not constitute a differential ‘class’, considering how the profit-driven organization of health care and pharmaceuticals impose differential burdens on those who live with HIV and AIDS? How are we to understand the production of the HIV population as a class of permanent debtors? Do poverty rates among lesbians not call to be thought in relation to the normative heterosexuality of the economy?

The Mode of Sexual Production

In *Justice Interrupts*, although Fraser acknowledges that ‘gender’ is ‘a basic structuring principle of the political economy’, the reason she offers is that it structures unpaid reproductive work.¹⁰ Although she makes very clear her support for lesbian and gay emancipatory struggles, and her opposition to homophobia, she does not pursue radically enough the implications of this support for the conceptualization she offers. She does not ask how the sphere of reproduction that guarantees the place of ‘gen-

¹⁰ Fraser, *Justice Interruptus*, p. 19.

der' within political economy is circumscribed by sexual regulation, that is, through what mandatory exclusions the sphere of reproduction becomes delineated and naturalized. Is there any way to analyze how normative heterosexuality and its 'genders' are produced within the sphere of reproduction without noting the compulsory ways in which homosexuality and bisexuality, as well as transgender, are *produced* as the sexually 'abject', and extending the mode of production to account for precisely this social mechanism of regulation? It would be a mistake to understand such productions as 'merely cultural' if they are essential to the functioning of the sexual order of political economy, that is, constituting a fundamental threat to its very workability. The economic, tied to the reproductive, is necessarily linked to the reproduction of heterosexuality. It is not that non-heterosexual forms of sexuality are simply left out, but that their suppression is essential to the operation of that prior normativity. This is not simply a question of certain people suffering a lack of cultural recognition by others but, rather, a specific mode of sexual production and exchange that works to maintain the stability of gender, the heterosexuality of desire, and the naturalization of the family.¹¹

Why, then, considering this fundamental place for sexuality in the thinking of production and distribution, would sexuality emerge as the exemplary figure for the 'cultural' within recent forms of Marxist and neo-Marxist argument?¹² How quickly—and sometimes unwittingly—the distinction between the material and the cultural is remanufactured when it assists in the drawing of the lines that jettison sexuality from the sphere of fundamental political structure! This suggests that the distinction is not a conceptual foundation, for it rests on a selective amnesia of the history of Marxism itself. After all, in addition to the structuralist supplementation of Marx, one finds the distinction between culture and material life entered into crisis from any number of different quarters. Marx himself argued that pre-capitalist economic formations could not be fully extricated from the cultural and symbolic worlds in which they were embedded, and this thesis has driven the important work in economic anthropology—Marshall Sahlins, Karl Polanyi, Henry Pearson. This work expands and refines Marx's thesis in *Precapitalist Economic Formations* that seeks to explain how the cultural and the economic themselves became established as separable spheres—indeed, how the institution of the economic as a separate sphere is the consequence of an operation of abstraction initiated by capital. Marx himself was aware that such distinctions are the effect and culmination of the division of labour, and cannot, therefore, be excluded from its structure: in *The German Ideology*, he writes, for example, that 'the division of labour only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labour appears.'¹³ This in part drives Althusser's effort to rethink the division of labour in 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in

¹¹ Moreover, although Fraser distinguishes between matters of cultural recognition and political economy, it is important to remember that only by entering into exchange does one become 'recognizable' and that recognition itself is a form and precondition of exchange.

¹² The place of sexuality in 'exchange' has been the focus of much of the work that sought to reconcile Lévi-Strauss's notion of kinship, based on normative accounts of heterosexual exchange within exogamic social structure, with Marxist notions of exchange.

¹³ Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 51.

terms of the reproduction of labour power and, most saliently, 'the forms of ideological subjection that [provide] for the reproduction of the skills of labour power'.¹⁴ This salience of the ideological in the reproduction of persons culminates in Althusser's groundbreaking argument that 'an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material.'¹⁵ Thus, even if homophobia were conceived only as a cultural attitude, that attitude should still be located in the apparatus and practice of its institutionalization.

Cultural and Material Gifts

Within feminist theory, the turn to Lévi-Strauss imported the analysis of the exchange of women into the Marxist critique of the family, and assumed for a time a paradigmatic status for the thinking of both gender and sexuality. Moreover, it was this important and problematic move that unsettled the stability of the distinction between cultural and material life. If women were a 'gift', according to Lévi-Strauss, then they entered into the process of exchange in ways that could be reduced to neither a cultural or a material sphere. According to Marcel Mauss, whose theory of the gift was appropriated by Lévi-Strauss, the gift establishes the limits of materialism. For Mauss, the economic is only one part of an exchange that assumes various cultural forms, and the relation between economic and cultural spheres is not as distinct as they have come to be. Although Mauss does not credit capitalism with the distinction between cultural and material life, he does offer an analysis that faults current forms of exchange for forms of brute materialism: 'originally the *res* need not have been the crude, merely tangible thing, the simple, passive object of transaction that it has become.'¹⁶ On the contrary, the *res* is understood to be the site for the convergence of a set of relationships. Similarly, the 'person' is not primarily separable from his or her 'objects': exchange consolidates or threatens social bonds.

Lévi-Strauss showed that this relation of exchange was not only cultural and economic at once, but made the distinction inappropriate and unstable: exchange produces a set of social relations, communicates a cultural or symbolic value—the coupling of which becomes salient for Lacanian departures from Lévi-Strauss—and secures routes of distribution and consumption. If the regulation of sexual exchange makes the distinction between the cultural and the economic difficult, if not impossible, to draw, then what are the consequences for a radical transformation of the lines of those exchange as they exceed and confound the ostensibly elementary structures of kinship? Would the distinction between the economic and the cultural become any easier to make if non-normative and counter-normative sexual exchange come to constitute the excessive circuitry of the gift in relation to kinship? The question is not whether sexual politics thus belong to the cultural or to the economic, but how the very practices of sexual exchange confound the distinction between the two spheres.

¹⁴ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, New York 1971, p. 133.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

¹⁶ Marcel Mauss, *An Essay on the Gift*, trans. W.D. Halls, New York 1990, p. 50.

Indeed, queer studies and lesbian and gay studies in their overlapping efforts have sought to challenge the presumed link between kinship and sexual reproduction, as well as the link between sexual reproduction, and sexuality. One might see in queer studies an important return to the Marxist critique of the family, based on a mobilizing insight into a *socially contingent and socially transformable account of kinship*, which takes its distance from the universalizing pathos of the Lévi-Straussian and Lacanian schemes that become paradigmatic for some forms of feminist theorizing. Although Lévi-Strauss's theory helped to show how heterosexual normativity produced gender in the service of its own self-augmentation, it could not provide the critical tools to show a way out of its impasses. The compulsory model of sexual exchange reproduces not only a sexuality constrained by reproduction, but a naturalized notion of 'sex' for which the role in reproduction is central. To the extent that naturalized sexes function to secure the heterosexual dyad as the holy structure of sexuality, they continue to underwrite kinship, legal and economic entitlement, and those practices that delimit what will be a socially recognizable person. To insist that the social forms of sexuality cannot only exceed but confound heterosexual kinship arrangements as well as reproduction is also to argue that what qualifies as a person and a sex will be radically altered—an argument that is not merely cultural, but which confirms the place of sexual regulation as a mode of producing the subject.

Are we perhaps witnessing a scholarly effort to ameliorate the political force of queer struggles by refusing to see the fundamental shift in the conceptualizing and institutionalizing of social relations that they demand? Is the association of the sexual with the cultural, and the concomitant effort to render autonomous and degrade the cultural sphere, the unthinking response to a sexual degradation perceived to be happening within the cultural sphere, an effort to colonize and contain homosexuality in and as the cultural itself?

The neoconservatism within the Left that seeks to discount the cultural can only always be another cultural intervention, whatever else it is. And yet the tactical manipulation of the distinction between cultural and economic to reinstitute the discredited notion of secondary oppression will only reprove the resistance to the imposition of unity, strengthening the suspicion that unity is only purchased through violent excision. Indeed, I would add that the understanding of this violence has compelled the affiliation with poststructuralism on the Left, that is, a way of reading that lets us understand what must be cut out from a concept of unity in order for it to gain the appearance of necessity and coherence, and to insist that difference remain constitutive of any struggle. This refusal to become resubordinated to a unity that caricatures, demeans, and domesticates difference becomes the basis for a more expansive and dynamic political impulse. This resistance to 'unity' carries with it the cipher of democratic promise on the Left.