

# What's material about materialist feminism?

## A Marxist Feminist critique

**Martha E. Gimenez**

In the heady days of the Women's Liberation Movement, it was possible to identify four main currents within feminist thought: Liberal (concerned with attaining economic and political equality within the context of capitalism); Radical (focused on men and patriarchy as the main causes of the oppression of women); Socialist (critical of capitalism and Marxism, so much so that avoidance of Marxism's alleged reductionisms resulted in dual systems theories postulating various forms of interaction between capitalism and patriarchy); and Marxist Feminism (a theoretical position held by relatively few feminists in the USA – myself included – which sought to develop the potential of Marxist theory to understand the capitalist sources of the oppression of women).

These are, of course, oversimplified descriptions of a rich and complex body of literature; however, they reflected important theoretical, political and social cleavages among women that continue to this day. Divisions in feminist thought multiplied as the effects of poststructuralist and postmodern theorizing emerged alongside grassroots challenges to a feminism perceived as the expression of the needs and concerns of middle- and upper-middle-class white 'First World' women. In the process, the subject of feminism became increasingly difficult to define. The postmodern critique of 'woman' as an essentialist category, together with critiques grounded in sexual preference, racial, ethnic and national origin differences, resulted in a seemingly never-ending proliferation of 'subject positions', 'identities' and 'voices'. Cultural and identity politics replaced the early focus on capitalism and (among Marxist Feminists primarily) class divisions among women. Today class has been reduced to another 'ism' – that is, to another form of oppression which, together with gender and race, integrates a sort of mantra, something that everyone ought to include

in theorizing and research; though, to my knowledge, theorizing about it remains at the level of metaphors (e.g. interweaving, interaction, interconnection).

I was, therefore, very interested to read, a few years ago, a call for papers for a volume on Materialist Feminism (MatFem). The description of MatFem put forward by the editors, Chrys Ingraham and Rosemary Hennessy, was to me indistinguishable from Marxist Feminism (MarxFem). This seemed such a promising development in feminist theory that I proceeded to invite the editors to join me in creating an electronic discussion list on Materialist Feminism, MatFem (<http://csf.colorado.edu/matfem>). Initially, I thought that MatFem was simply another way of referring to MarxFem, but I was mistaken; the two are distinct forms of feminist theorizing. There are, however, such similarities between them in some feminists' work that some degree of confusion between the two is to be expected.

In this article, I will identify the differences between these two important currents within feminist theory, and the reasons for the return of feminist appeals to materialism at a time when the theoretical shift towards idealism and contingency seems hegemonic in the academy. Given the conflicting views that coexist under the materialist cover, I will argue for a clear break between Materialist and Marxist Feminisms, and for a return to the latter necessitated by the devastating effects of capitalism on women and the consequent political importance of a theoretically adequate analysis of the causes of their plight.

### **What is Materialist Feminism?**

To define MatFem is not an easy task. Theorists who self-identify as Materialist or as Marxist Feminists differ in their understanding of what these labels

mean and, consequently, the kind of knowledges they produce. Depending on their theoretical allegiances and self-understanding, feminists may differ in their classification of other feminists' works, so that clear lines of theoretical demarcation between and within these two umbrella terms are somewhat difficult to establish. Take, for example, Lise Vogel's work.<sup>1</sup> I always considered Vogel a Marxist Feminist because, unlike Socialist Feminists (whose avoidance of Marx's alleged reductionisms led them to postulate ahistorical theories of patriarchy),<sup>2</sup> she took Marxism seriously and her analysis of reproduction as a basis for the oppression of women is firmly grounded within the Marxist tradition. However, the subtitle of her recent book (a collection of previously published essays), is 'Essays for a Materialist Feminism'. Self-identifying as a Socialist Feminist, she states that Socialist Feminists 'sought to replace the socialist tradition's theorizing about the woman question with a "materialist" understanding of women's oppression'.<sup>3</sup> This is certainly news to me: Socialist Feminism's rejection of Marx's and Marxism's 'reductionism' led to the deliberate effort to ground 'patriarchy' outside the mode of production and consequently – from the standpoint of Marxist theory – outside history. Materialism, Vogel tells us, was used to highlight the key role of production – including domestic production – in determining the conditions leading to the oppression of women. Materialism was also used as 'a flag', to situate Socialist Feminism within feminist thought and within the Left; Materialist Feminism, Vogel argues, cannot therefore be reduced to a trend in cultural studies, as some literary critics would prefer.<sup>4</sup> But wasn't Engels's analysis materialist?<sup>5</sup> And didn't Marxist Feminists (Margaret Benston<sup>6</sup> and Peggy Morton<sup>7</sup> come to mind) explore the ways production – public and domestic – oppressed and exploited women?

These brief comments about Vogel's understanding of MatFem highlight some of its problematic aspects as a term intended to identify a specific trend within feminist theory. It can blur, as it does in this instance, the qualitative differences that existed and continue to exist between Socialist Feminism, the dominant strand of feminist thought in the USA during the late 1960s and 1970s, and the marginalized Marxist Feminism. I am not imputing such motivations to Lise Vogel; I am simply pointing out the effects of such an interpretation of US Socialist Feminism, which, despite the use of Marxist terms and references to capitalism, developed theoretically as a sort of feminist abstract negation of Marxism.

Other feminists, for different reasons, would also disagree with Vogel's interpretation. For Toril Moi and Janice Radway, for example, the relationship between Socialist Feminism and MatFem is 'far from clear'.<sup>8</sup> As editors of a special issue of *The South Atlantic Quarterly* dedicated to this topic, they do not offer a theory or a clear definition of the term. Presumably, the issue's content will give the reader the elements necessary to define the term for herself, because all the authors 'share a commitment to concrete historical and cultural analysis, and to feminism understood as an "emancipatory narrative"'.<sup>9</sup> One of these authors, Jennifer Wicke, defines MatFem as follows:

a feminism that insists on examining the material conditions under which social arrangements, including those of gender hierarchy, develop ... materialist feminism avoids seeing this [gender hierarchy] as the effect of a singular ... patriarchy and instead gauges the web of social and psychic relations that make up a material, historical moment; ... materialist feminism argues that material conditions of all sorts play a vital role in the social production of gender and assays the different ways in which women collaborate and participate in these productions ... there are areas of material interest in the fact that women can bear children.... Materialist feminism ... is less likely than social constructionism to be embarrassed by the occasional material importance of sex differences.<sup>10</sup>

Insistence on the importance of material conditions; material historical moments as a complex of social relations which include and influence gender hierarchy; the materiality of the body and its sexual, reproductive and other biological functions: these remain, however, abstract pronouncements which unavoidably lead to an empiricist focus on the immediately given. There is no theory of history, of social relations or of the production of gender hierarchies that could give guidance about the meaning of whatever is observed in a given 'material historical moment'.

Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean, authors of *Materialist Feminisms*,<sup>11</sup> tell us that theirs is a book 'about feminism and Marxism', examining the debates between feminism and Marxism in the USA and Britain and exploring the implications of those debates for literary and cultural theory. The terrain of those early debates, which were aimed at a possible integration or synthesis between Marxism and feminism, shifted due to the emergence of identity politics, concern with postcolonialism, sexuality, race, nationalism, and so on, and the impact of postmodernism and poststructuralism. The new terrain has to do with the 'construction of a materialist analysis of culture informed by

and responsive to the concerns of women, as well as people of colour and other marginalized groups'.<sup>12</sup> For Landry and Maclean, MatFem is a

critical reading practice ... the critical investigation, or reading in the strong sense, of the artifacts of culture and social history, including literary and artistic texts, archival documents, and works of theory ... [it is] a potential site of political contestation through critique, not through the constant reiteration of home-truths ... a deconstructive materialist feminist perspective.<sup>13</sup>

But what, precisely, does materialist mean in this context? What theory of history and what politics inform this critique? Although they define materialism in a philosophical and moral sense, and bring up the difference between mechanical or 'vulgar' materialism and historical materialism, there is no definition of what materialism means when linked to feminism. Cultural materialism, as developed in Raymond Williams's work, is presented as a remedy for or supplement to Marx's historical materialism. There is, according to Williams, an 'indissoluble connection between material production, political and cultural institutions and activity, and consciousness... Language is practical consciousness, a way of thinking and acting in the world that has material consequences.<sup>14</sup> Williams, they point out, 'strives to put human subjects as agents of culture back into materialist debate'.<sup>15</sup>

The implications of these statements is that 'humans as agents of culture' are not present in historical materialism and that Marx's views on the relationship between material conditions, language and consciousness are insufficient. But anyone familiar with Marx's work would reject this view. In fact, it is Marx who wrote that 'language is practical consciousness' and posited language as the matter that burdens 'spirit' from the very start, for consciousness is always and from the very first a social product.<sup>16</sup>

Landry and Maclean present an account of the development of feminist thought from the late 1960s to the present, divided into three moments: the encounters and debates between Marxism and feminism in Britain and the USA; the institutionalization and commodification of feminism; and 'deconstructive materialist feminism'. These are 'three moments of materialist feminism':<sup>17</sup> a very interesting statement that suggests that MatFem – a rather problematic and elusive concept which reflects, in my view, postmodern sensibilities about culture and about the subject of feminism – had always been there, from the very beginning, just waiting to be discovered. Is that really the case? If so, what is this materialism that lurked

under the variety of feminist theories produced on both sides of the Atlantic since the late 1960s? Does reference to 'material conditions' in general or to 'the material conditions of the oppression of women' suffice as a basis for constructing a new theoretical framework, qualitatively different from MarxFem? If so, how? The authors argue that feminist theories focused exclusively on gender and dual systems theories that bring together gender and class analysis face methodological and political problems that 'deconstructive reading practices can help solve'; they propose 'the articulation of discontinuous movements, materialism and feminism, an articulation that takes the political claims of deconstruction seriously ... deconstruction as tool of political critique'.<sup>18</sup> But isn't the linking between deconstruction and Marxism what gives it its critical edge? It is in their conclusion that the authors, aiming to demonstrate that materialism is not an alias for Marxism, outline the difference between MarxFem and MatFem as follows:

Marxist feminism holds class contradictions and class analysis central, and has tried various ways of working an analysis of gender oppression around this central contradiction. In addition to class contradictions and contradictions within gender ideology ... we are arguing that materialist feminism should recognize as material other contradictions as well. These contradictions also have histories, operate in ideologies, and are grounded in material bases and effects ... they should be granted material weight in social and literary analysis calling itself materialist ... these categories would include ... ideologies of race, sexuality, imperialism and colonialism and anthropocentrism, with their accompanying radical critiques.<sup>19</sup>

While this is helpful in understanding what contemporary self-identified materialist feminists mean when they refer to MatFem, it does not shed light on the meaning of material base, material effect, and material weight. The main concept, materiality, remains undefined; at times it seems to mean real or objective (e.g. gender and race are as real as class), or central – meaning determinant, having causal effects (e.g. ideologies are just as central or have as much 'material weight' as class). Underlying these ideas lurk the spectres of 'class reductionism' and 'economic determinism', a stereotypical understanding of Marx and the Marxist tradition used to argue for the superiority of claims defined, essentially, as their abstract negation. Also lurking are Althusser's<sup>20</sup> views on the materiality of ideology, now expanded to analyse all forms of oppression and oppositional identities, but with a crucial difference. While for Althusser the level

of production and, consequently, the contradictions between capital and labour and between the forces and relations of production are determinant 'in the last instance', albeit 'overdetermined' and rendered historically specific and active by the characteristics of concrete social formations.<sup>21</sup> Materialist Feminism appears to rest upon the unsupported claim that there is no hierarchy of causality: all other forms of inequality besides class, and its corresponding ideologies, are equally 'material', meaning they are not only equally real and important but also equal in their causal powers. Such a conclusion might be politically satisfying, but it rests upon a functional notion of causality according to which all institutions or elements of the social system mutually interact and affect each other, and none is 'more' causally efficacious than any others – that is, none can set parameters for the conditions of possibility and development of the others. And what is the nature of the other 'contradictions' materialist feminists should recognize? Contradiction is not equivalent to conflict, for conflicts can be resolved within a given system of relations, whereas contradiction can be resolved solely through qualitative social change. Finally, references to ideologies, exploitation, imperialism, oppression, colonialism, and so on, confirm precisely that which the authors intended to dispel: materialism would seem to be an alias for Marxism, a Marxism suitably modified, however, to grant materiality (meaning, perhaps, objectivity, reality and equal causal efficacy) to everything.

### **MatFem/MarxFem: same difference?**

Rosemary Hennessy traces the origins of Materialist Feminism in the work of British and French femi-

nists who preferred the term Materialist Feminism to Marxist Feminism because, in their view, Marxism had to be transformed to be able to explain the sexual division of labour.<sup>22</sup> In the 1970s, Hennessy states, Marxism was inadequate to the task because of its class bias and focus on production, while feminism was also problematic due to its essentialist and idealist concept of woman. This is why MatFem emerged as a positive alternative to both Marxism and feminism.<sup>23</sup> The combined effects of the postmodern critique of the empirical self and the criticisms voiced by women who did not see themselves included in the generic woman subject of academic feminist theorizing resulted, in the 1990s, in Materialist Feminist analyses that 'problematize "woman" as an obvious and homogeneous empirical entity in order to explore how "woman" as a discursive category is historically constructed and traversed by more than one differential axis'.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Hennessy argues, despite the postmodern rejection of totalities and theoretical analyses of social systems, Materialist Feminists need to hold on to the critique of the totalities that affect women's lives: patriarchy and capitalism. Women's lives are everywhere affected by world capitalism and patriarchy, and it would be politically self-defeating to replace that critique with localized, fragmented political strategies and a perception of social reality as characterized by a logic of contingency.

Hennessy's views on the characteristics of MatFem emerge through her critical engagement with the works of Laclau and Mouffe, Foucault, Kristeva and other theorists of the postmodern. MatFem is a 'way of reading' that rejects the dominant pluralist paradigms and logics of contingency and seeks to establish the connections between the discursively constructed dif-





ferentiated subjectivities that have replaced the generic 'woman' in feminist theorizing, and the hierarchies of inequality that exploit and oppress women. Subjectivities, in other words, cannot be understood in isolation from systemically organized totalities. MatFem, as a reading practice, is also a way of explaining or rewriting and making sense of the world; as such, it influences reality through the knowledges it produces about the subject and her social context. Discourse and knowledge have materiality in their effects; one of the material effects of discourse is the construction of the subject, but this subject is traversed by differences grounded in hierarchies of inequality which are not local or contingent but historical and systemic, such as patriarchy and capitalism. Difference, consequently, is not mere plurality but inequality.

The problem of the material relationship between language, discourse and the social, or between the discursive (feminist theory) and the non-discursive (women's lives divided by exploitative and oppressive social relations), can be resolved through the conceptualization of discourse as ideology. A theory of ideology presupposes a theory of the social. This theory, which informs Hennessy's critical reading of postmodern theories of the subject, discourse, positionality, language, and so on, is what she calls a 'global analytic', which, in light of her references to multinational capitalism, the international division of labour, overdetermined economic, political and cultural practices, and so on, seems to be at the very least a kind of postmodern Marxism. In fact, references to historical materialism, and Althusser's theory of ideology and the notion of symptomatic reading are so important in the development of her arguments that one wonders about her hesitation to name Marxism or historical materialism as the theory of the social underlying her critique of the postmodern logic of contingency.

To sum up, Hennessy's version of MatFem is a blend of post-Marxism and postmodern theories of the subject. It is a source of 'readings' and 're-writings' that rescue postmodern categories of analysis (subject, discourse, difference) from the conservative limbo of contingency, localism and pluralism to historicize or contextualize them by connecting them to their systemic material basis in capitalism and patriarchy. This is made possible by understanding discourse as ideology and linking ideology to its material base in the 'global analytic'.

In Hennessy's analysis, historical materialism seems like an ever-present but muted shadow, latent under terms such as 'totality', 'systemic' and 'global

analytic'. However, in the introduction to *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference and Women's Lives*,<sup>25</sup> written with co-editor, Chrys Ingraham, there is a clear, unambiguous return to historical materialism, a recognition of its irreplaceable importance for feminist theory and politics. This introduction, 'Reclaiming Anticapitalist Feminism',<sup>26</sup> is a critique of the dominant feminist concern with culture, identity and difference considered in isolation from any systemic understanding of the social forces that affect women's lives; and a critique of an academic feminism that has marginalized and disparaged the knowledges produced by the engagement of feminists with Marxism, and their contributions to feminist scholarship and to the political mobilization of women. More importantly, this introduction is a celebration of MarxFem, whose premisses and insights, they argue, have been consistently 'misread, distorted, or buried under the weight of a flourishing postmodern cultural politics'.<sup>27</sup> They point out that, whatever the name of the product of feminists' efforts to grapple with historical materialism (MatFem, Socialist Feminism or MarxFem), and though these names signal theoretical differences and emphases, together they indicate the recognition of historical materialism as the source of emancipatory knowledge required for the success of the feminist project.

In Hennessy and Ingraham's introduction, MatFem becomes a term used interchangeably with MarxFem, with the latter being the most prominently displayed. The authors draw a clear line between the cultural materialism that characterizes the work of post-Marxist feminists, who, having rejected historical materialism, analyse cultural, ideological and political practices in isolation from their material base in capitalism, and MatFem (meaning both MarxFem and Socialist Feminism), which is firmly grounded in historical materialism: 'unlike cultural feminists, materialist, socialist and Marxist feminists do not see culture as the whole of social life but rather as only one arena of social production and therefore as only one area of feminist struggle'.<sup>28</sup> The authors differentiate MatFem from MarxFem by indicating that MatFem is the end result of several discourses (historical materialism, Marxist and Radical Feminisms, and postmodern and psychoanalytic theories of meaning and subjectivity) among which the postmodern input, in their view, is the source of its defining characteristics.

Nevertheless, in the last paragraphs of the introduction there is a return to the discussion of MarxFem, its critiques of the idealist features of postmodernism

and the differences between the postmodern and the historical materialist or Marxist analyses of representations of identity. Theoretical conflicts, they point out, do not occur in isolation from class conflicts, and the latter affect the divisions among professional feminists and their class allegiances. Feminists are divided in their attitudes towards capitalism, their understanding of the material conditions of oppression, and the extent to which they link the success of feminist struggles to the success of anticapitalist struggles. To be a feminist is not necessarily to be anticapitalist, and to be a Materialist Feminist is not equivalent to being socialist or even critical of the status quo. In fact, ‘work that claims the signature “materialist feminism” shares much in common with cultural feminism, in that it does not set out to explain or change the material realities that link women’s oppression to class.’<sup>29</sup> MarxFem, on the other hand, does make the connection between the oppression of women and capitalism, and this is why the purpose of their book, according to the authors, is

to reinsert into MatFem – especially in those over-developed sectors where this collection will be most widely read – those (untimely) Marxist feminist knowledges that the drift to cultural politics in postmodern feminism has suppressed. It is our hope that in so doing this project will contribute to the emergence of feminism’s third wave and its revival as a critical force for transformative social change.<sup>30</sup>

In light of the above – and given the inherent ambiguity of the term MatFem – wouldn’t it be more theoretically adequate and politically fruitful to return to Marxist Feminism? Is the effort of struggling to redefine MatFem by reinserting MarxFem knowledges a worthwhile endeavour? How important is it to broaden the meaning of MatFem to include MarxFem contents? Perhaps the political climate inside and outside the academy in the USA is one where Marxism is so discredited that Marxist Feminists are likely to find more professional acceptance and legitimacy by claiming MatFem as their theoretical orientation. I do not in any way impute this motivation to Ingraham and Hennessy; the introduction to their *Materialist Feminism* is openly Marxist. In fact, after I had read it and looked over the table of contents, I thought a more adequate title would have been *Marxist Feminism*. And anyone familiar with historical materialism can appreciate the sophisticated Marxist foundation of Hennessy’s superbly argued book.

### **Materialist Feminist: am I that name?**

Such positive feminist assessment of the theoretical and political relevance of Marxism is, however, rare

these days. Feminists are more likely to share Landry and Maclean’s critique of Marxism’s alleged economism, class reductionism, and disregard for agency and the effects of culture and ideology. Underlying these and similar feminist criticisms of Marxism’s putative shortcomings, there is an economic and undialectical reading of Marx’s work. That Marx may not have addressed issues that twentieth-century feminists consider important is not a sufficient condition to invalidate his methodology as well as the potential of his theory of capitalism to help us theorize and investigate the causes of the oppression of women. This potential, however, was widely recognized in the early stages of the Women’s Liberation Movement. In retrospect, the work produced by some British self-defined Materialist Feminists writing in the 1970s reveals that they were actually using and developing Marxist theory in ways that belied their critical stance towards Marxism. Kuhn and Wolpe, for example, editors of the collection *Materialism and Feminism*,<sup>31</sup> adopted Engels’s definition of materialism:

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.<sup>32</sup>

A materialist problematic entailed, then, recognition of the fundamental importance, for the analysis of human history and social organization, of the production and reproduction of material life – that is, the transformation of nature and human nature through labour in the context of changing relations of production and reproduction.<sup>33</sup> For Kuhn and Wolpe, the difference between a Marxist and a materialist analysis hinged upon whether or not analysis went beyond the ‘traditional’ Marxist focus on modes of production, their tendencies, contradictions and so forth, to incorporate the historical character of the sexual division of labour and the examination of ‘the relations of women to the modes of production and reproduction’.<sup>34</sup> It followed that Marxism could not yield a ‘correct’ analysis of the oppression of women unless it was transformed by including the analysis of the sexual division of labour and all other aspects of the mode of production directly and indirectly affecting male–female relationships. Contributors to their volume attempted in various ways to remedy Marxism’s ‘failures’ by creatively using Marxist theory

to explore the relationships between capitalism and institutions that specifically oppressed women – for example, patriarchy, the family, the state, domestic labour, the sexual division of labour, and women’s place in the labour force.

MatFem was also associated with the work of some French feminists, particularly Christine Delphy.<sup>35</sup> Materialism (that is, the Marxist method), she argued, is the only theory of history that views oppression as the most fundamental reality. This is why women and all oppressed groups need it to examine their situation: ‘to start from oppression defines a materialist approach ... oppression is a materialist concept.’<sup>36</sup> For Delphy, the family or domestic mode of production, analytically independent of and separate from production, was the site of patriarchal exploitation and the material basis of the oppression of women. Marriage, she argued, is a labour contract that gives men the right to exploit women, appropriating their labour in the domestic setting or controlling their wages or other market earnings; it is, for all practical purposes, a relationship of slavery.<sup>37</sup> Delphy sought in the organization of the mode of reproduction the structural basis for gender divisions. Rather than inquiring into the social construction of gender or the ways in which individuals acquire gender identities, she sought to identify the material conditions that place men and women in unequal relations. Barrett and McIntosh<sup>38</sup> criticized Delphy on several grounds. They accused her of economism (she rejected analyses that gave causal importance to ideology), an overemphasis on the exploitation of women as wives (overlooking the effects of motherhood and the situation of single women) and for inappropriately applying the concept of mode of production to the family. In postulating the autonomy of the family or domestic mode of production from the mode of production as such, they argued, Delphy isolated it from the dynamics of social change.<sup>39</sup> An acceptable materialist analysis, in their view, should connect the economic and ideological levels of analysis, examining how material (i.e. economic) conditions structure consciousness.<sup>40</sup>

Although earlier self-defined materialist feminists may have understood Barrett and McIntosh’s work to be one of ‘transforming’ Marxist theory, they actually demonstrated its fundamental importance for theorizing the oppression of women. A theoretical transformation would have entailed a challenge to Marxism’s fundamental assumptions, rather than the use of those very assumptions to theorize new phenomena. To demonstrate, as they did, a dialectical understanding of Marxism, introducing in the analysis of the oppression

of women the causal efficacy of the state, ideology, the family and other aspects of capitalist society, is to remain faithful its basic tenets, not to transform it.

I too wrote about Marxism and feminism in the 1970s; my approach was different, for I viewed the lacunae in Marx’s work simply as results of his immediate political and theoretical priorities. Because Marx’s method shows the problems inherent in abstract theories of origins, and reveals the dialectical nature of our categories of analysis,<sup>41</sup> I concluded early on that the notion of patriarchy was descriptively useful, but theoretically unsound because it was intentionally developed to seek the origin of the oppression of women outside history (i.e. independent from the mode of production). I was also critical of the use of ‘women’ and ‘men’ as categories of analysis (they ignored class, racial and ethnic divisions, and socio-economic status differences) and the utopian nature of ‘sisterhood’, given the real contradictions in the material interests of capitalist and working-class women. I originate from Argentina, a society where, unlike the United States, professional women were not exceptional, class divisions and self-identification prevailed and the use of domestic servants was widespread (an important reason for the lack of conflict between work and family for professional and employed middle-class women). I was, consequently, unconvinced by theories which overgeneralized about male domination and female oppression and which were not sensitive to the realities of life under capitalism, where most men are not powerful and do not have control over their lives and not all women are powerless. More nuanced theories, differentiating between kinds of oppression and corresponding levels of analyses were required. This is why, in my work, I sought to identify the historically specific capitalist conditions underlying the observable social and economic inequalities between men and women.

However, I have never self-identified as a Materialist Feminist; the label, in my view, misrepresented the dialectical nature of Marxism and obscured the actual Marxist nature of the works thus labelled. While there were some overlaps between my views and those of Materialist and Socialist Feminists of the 1970s, both in terms of topics of analysis and in the aspects of Marx’s theory of capitalism considered pertinent to examine the oppression of women, my work differs in the rejection of patriarchy as an explanatory concept, and in the use of Marx’s method to identify the capitalist processes that place propertyless men and women in similar class locations while facing different opportunity structures and, therefore, unequal access

to the necessary conditions of reproduction.<sup>42</sup> But more important than the differences and similarities between my work and that of other 1970s Socialist Feminists, in the USA and in Britain, is the issue of the present resurgence of MatFem as a fashionable trend within feminist theory. Why has MatFem reappeared? Why is it a 'hot' commodity, as reflected in the abundance of recent publications with 'materialism' in their title? Is MatFem a positive development in feminist theory? Should Marxist feminists struggle to regain political and academic legitimacy, thus striving to differentiate MarxFem from MatFem?

### **Why Materialist Feminism now? Does it matter?**

While it is difficult to disentangle MatFem from MarxFem in early feminist works, especially those written by European feminists, today MatFem and MarxFem are qualitatively different theoretical perspectives, with radically different political implications. That they have become somewhat confused reflects the ideological balance of power in the present political context, in academia and in the publishing business, where 'difference', 'race, gender and class', 'post-isms' and, of course, 'materialism' have legitimacy and sell, while historical materialism does not.

Early Materialist Feminists took Marxism as their starting point. Despite critiques of Marxism's shortcomings, Marxist and Materialist Feminists agreed on the importance of situating the oppression of women in the context of the capitalist mode of production as a whole, examining how the capitalist organization of production, the articulation between production and reproduction, ideologies, the state, the legal system, and so forth, affected and reproduced the unequal relations between men and women within and outside the domestic sphere. Despite disagreements, they shared Engels's conception of historical materialism,<sup>43</sup> which gives a pivotal role in human history to the organization of production and reproduction and their changing articulation, as the forces and relations of production change and modes of production change accordingly.

Today MatFem is altogether different because it is grounded in the poststructuralist rejection of Marxism. The deconstruction of 'women' as a category of analysis, the focus on 'discursively constructed' genders, sexualities, bodies, and manifold differences among women, have severed the links between feminist theory and the actual conditions shaping most women's lives. Today, 'feminist theory has come to mean feminist poststructuralism'<sup>44</sup> and this entails the adoption of

principles (e.g. anti-essentialism, contingency, social constructionism, reduction of social reality to discourse, rejection of 'metanarratives', and so on) antithetical to the development of social analyses and political strategies useful for women and all oppressed people.<sup>45</sup> The very idea of women's oppression presupposes the material reality of their plight and the validity of their claims, notions outside the purview of theories for which everything is relative, contingent and discursively constructed. It is this inability to deal with the material (that is, objective, independent of the subject's consciousness) conditions affecting real women's lives that, Ebert argues, has produced a crisis in postmodern feminist thought, because the objectivity and forceful impact of historical processes 'cannot be blunted in discourse'; this is why 'historical materialism haunts feminism'.<sup>46</sup>

In light of the objectively worsening conditions of working people, particularly women, it has become increasingly untenable to hold on to the notion that everything is socially or discursively constructed, or a localized, contingent story. The oppression of women is not a story, or a text, or a form of interpreting or reading the world, so that politics is reduced to rewriting or re-describing the world, a conclusion that follows from the insistence on the materiality of discourse. Because postmodern Materialist Feminists have rejected all 'metanarratives', discourses have a contradictory relationship to the capitalist structures, processes and contradictions that are their condition of possibility. They are only 'contingently' related (thus duly avoiding the spectres of 'reductionism' and 'economism') to the mode of production, but, as they are considered to be material in their effects, they are *de facto* assumed to be determinant in their own right, thus resulting in an unacknowledged discursive reductionism.

Hennessy and Ingraham argue for the need to keep a connection between discourse, conceptualized as ideology, and the relevant 'global analytics' which oppress women: patriarchy and capitalism. Their efforts, however, are not sufficient to rescue contemporary MatFem from its clearly anti-Marxist stance and only contribute to increase the ambiguity of the concept. Besides, MatFem has moved further away from the possibility of bridging the gap between discourses, ideologies and the mode of production. The latest reincarnation of poststructuralist materialism is not the matter of language, or the text or discourse, but rather 'the resisting "matter" of the non-discursive', with the body as the matter under consideration.<sup>47</sup> Matter, whether of the body or anything else,





has to be rendered historically specific in order to become theoretically and politically significant, for 'matter as such is a pure creation of thought and an abstraction'.<sup>48</sup> This, in turn, presupposes consideration of the characteristics of the mode of production which determine the kinds of labour processes and other forms of practice that, dialectically, transform nature and human nature, forms of existence and forms of consciousness, bodies and discourses about bodies, and so forth. This approach to theorizing matter and materialism is, however, in contradiction with the assumptions of post-Marxist MatFem, which consequently faces an unresolvable dilemma: 'how not to deny the world outside the consciousness of the subject but not to make that world the material cause of social practices either'.<sup>49</sup> If materiality implies causality, the denial of the causal efficacy of the mode of production (for example, through changes in the forces of production, class exploitation, class struggles, and so on) while postulating the materiality of language and discourse ends up in a discourse determinism that undermines the very role that the materiality of discourse is supposed to play, because 'if even meaning is material, then there is nothing which is not, and the term simply cancels all the way through'.<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps these theoretical and political dead-ends of post-Marxist MatFem are the basis for its academic and commercial appeal. There is an 'elective affinity'<sup>51</sup> between its dominant theoretical assumptions (which essentially privilege agency, embrace contingency and exonerate capitalism; minimizing the pivotal role of class exploitation while emphasizing plurality, diversity and identity politics), the dominant ideologies in the advanced capitalist countries, and the lifestyles and world-views of the middle- and upper-middle-class professionals and students who have eagerly embraced

postmodernism and poststructuralism, including MatFem, in its various manifestations.

MatFem, a term which may have been useful in the past to feminists who, despite their critical stance, remained firmly within the Marxist tradition, denotes something entirely different today. How useful is it to broaden the meaning of MatFem to encompass MarxFem if, at the same time, the term is claimed by cultural materialists and post-Marxist feminists whose views are profoundly anti-Marxist? That two anthologies of Marxist Feminist writings have been published under the aegis of Materialist Feminism attest to the greater market value of 'materialism' and publishers' power to decide what sells, rather than the existence of a theoretical convergence between MarxFem and MatFem. How will the new generations learn about the theoretical and political importance of historical materialism for women if historical materialist analysis is tamed and 'gentrified' under the MatFem label? Marx and Marxism have already been marginalized in academia; the inclusion of MarxFem under the MatFem umbrella would only intensify already widespread misunderstandings among the younger generations of feminists because, calling attention to the 'material' in historical materialism, it would strengthen dominant stereotypes about the 'vulgar materialism' presumably inherent in Marxism. It is time, therefore, for Marxist Feminists to separate themselves from Materialist Feminism and assert the legitimacy and political urgency of their approach.

Essentially, this would entail a return to Marx, whose method and analysis of capitalism, despite its ambiguities, omissions, complexities and nineteenth-century limitations, has far more to offer feminists and all oppressed people than contemporary theories which, having severed the internal relationship between existence and consciousness, or between

discourse and its material conditions of possibility, postulate the materiality of the discursive and whatever there might be ‘outside’ discourse (Nature? the Body?) while rejecting as ‘economism’ the materiality – the reality, independent of people’s consciousness, and causal efficacy – of labour and of the mode of production. As Ebert unerringly points out, Marx’s critique of ‘Feuerbachian materialism’ aptly describes today’s MatFem’s materialism: ‘As far as Feuerbach is a materialist he does not deal with history, and as far as he considers history he is not a materialist.’<sup>52</sup>

There is another reason why MarxFem should ‘de-link’ from MatFem: Marxist Feminists are, theoretically speaking, clearer about what MarxFem is all about, politically and theoretically. MatFem, on the other hand, remains a nebulous thing, a place for feminists who are clear about their rejection of Marx and Marxism’s alleged flaws, but seem to be less certain about what they stand for. Feminist scholars, of course, do know what the modern MatFem they theorize is all about, but their work would seem to have difficulties in engaging the consumers of their scholarship. I am grounding these assertions in the very different development of two electronic discussion networks, MATFEM and M-Fem.<sup>53</sup> MATFEM (Materialist Feminism), which I created in December 1994 with Chrys Ingraham and Rosemary Hennessy, has had for years a stable membership of over 350 (it is currently 363). At the beginning, there were the usual messages of self-introduction, but, when those ceased, to our disappointment, no sustained discussions took their place. We once attempted a discussion of an article by Rosemary Hennessy, but this project failed. The list has been mostly silent; once in a while someone will post the announcement of a book, or a call for papers. MATFEM lacks a sense of community of intellectual and political purpose; there is no sense of urgency in examining, from a Materialist Feminist standpoint, the various processes that continue to oppress women. M-Fem (Marxist Feminism) is a network I did not create, but that I help moderate. It was created in May 1997; its small membership (72) reflects the scarcity of self-defined Marxist Feminists today. While the volume of mail varies and the network goes through relatively long periods of silence, it has produced very lively and useful theoretical and political discussions and altogether a far greater quantity of messages than MATFEM. A substantial portion of this article was, in fact, written as a response to an M-Fem member who asked about the difference between MatFem and MarxFem. I posted it in both lists but drew no reactions from MATFEM (except an enthusiastic, positive

response from Rosemary Hennessy) while eliciting a number of comments in M-Fem. The quantitative and qualitative difference between these networks’ archives is remarkable: M-Fem archives document the power of Marxism to examine the conditions affecting women’s lives today,<sup>54</sup> while the meagreness of MATFEM’s archives can be interpreted as resulting from the relative theoretical irrelevance and political sterility of postmodern feminism. MATFEM, in almost five years, has been unable to generate a single sustained theoretical or political discussion, despite its far larger membership.

Realistically, it can be professionally and politically risky for US academic feminists openly to advocate Marxist Feminism. Self-identified Marxist Feminists are likely to face a difficult time, politically and professionally. They would be perceived as ‘orthodox’ or ‘fundamentalist’ Marxists and would find difficulties in finding employment, especially at this time when tenure-track jobs are becoming increasingly scarce in US universities. In the short run, therefore, MatFem’s academic dominance might remain unchallenged. In the long run – and depending on changes in the world capitalist economy leading to transnational political upheavals and greater awareness among feminist scholars of the extent to which most working women’s fate is tied to the contradictions of world capitalism – the timeliness and relevance of Marxism might once again become self-evident. In the meantime, as the uneasy and confusing relationship between MarxFem and MatFem illustrates so well, the class struggle at the level of ideology goes on.

## Notes

1. Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick NJ, 1983; *Woman’s Questions: Essays for a Materialist Feminism*, Routledge, New York, 1995.
2. See, for example, Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, Bantam Books, New York, 1971; Zillah Eisenstein, ‘Developing a Theory of Capitalist Patriarchy and Socialist Feminism’, in Z. Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1979.
3. Vogel, *Woman’s Questions*, p. xi.
4. *Ibid.*, p. xii.
5. Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, International Publishers, New York, 1972; see also Janet Sayers, Mary Evans and Nanneke Redclift, eds, *Engels Revisited: New Feminist Essays*, Tavistock, London, 1987.
6. Margaret Benston, ‘The Political Economy of Women’s Liberation’, *Monthly Review*, vol. 21, September 1969.
7. Peggy Morton, ‘A Woman’s Work is Never Done’, in Edith Altbach, ed., *From Feminism to Liberation*, Schenkman, Cambridge MA, 1971.
8. Toril Moi and Janice Radway, ‘Editors’ Note’, *Material-*

- ist Feminism*, Special Issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 93, no. 4, 1994.
9. Ibid., p. 750.
  10. Jennifer Wicke, 'Celebrity Material: Materialist Feminism and the Culture of Celebrity', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 93, no. 4, 1994.
  11. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean, *Materialist Feminisms*, Blackwell, Cambridge MA and Oxford, 1993.
  12. Ibid., pp. ix–x.
  13. Ibid., pp. x–xi.
  14. Ibid., pp. xiii, 5.
  15. Ibid., p. 5.
  16. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon, Hackett, Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1994, p. 117.
  17. Landry and Maclean, *Materialist Feminisms*, p. 15.
  18. Ibid., pp. 12–13.
  19. Ibid., p. 229.
  20. Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1971, pp. 127–86.
  21. See Louis Althusser, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', in *For Marx*, Vintage Books, New York, 1970, especially pp. 111–16. Marx had expressed the same idea when he stated that, while the relations of production 'reveal the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure. ... this does not prevent the same economic basis ... due to innumerable different empirical circumstances ... from showing infinite variations and gradations in appearance, which can be ascertained only by analysis of the empirically given circumstances.' Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 3, International Publishers, New York, 1968, pp. 791–2.
  22. Rosemary Hennessy, *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*, Routledge, New York and London, 1993, pp. xi–xii.
  23. Ibid., p. xii.
  24. Ibid.
  25. Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham, *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives*, Routledge, New York and London, 1997.
  26. Ibid., pp. 1–14.
  27. Ibid., p. 5.
  28. Ibid., p. 7.
  29. Ibid., p. 9.
  30. Ibid.
  31. Annette Kuhn and Annemarie Wolpe, eds, *Feminism and Materialism: Women and Modes of Production*, Routledge, London, 1978.
  32. Ibid., p. 7.
  33. Ibid.
  34. Ibid., pp. 7–8.
  35. Christine Delphy, *The Main Enemy: A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression*, Women's Research and Resources Centre Publications, London, 1977.
  36. Christine Delphy, 'A Materialist Feminism is Possible', *Feminist Review*, No. 4, 1980, p. 87
  37. Delphy, *The Main Enemy*, p. 15.
  38. Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, *The Anti-social Family*, Verso, London, 1982.
  39. Ibid., p. 99.
  40. Ibid., p. 103.
  41. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, International Publishers, New York, 1970, pp. 205–6.
  42. See, for example, Martha E. Gimenez, 'Marxism and Feminism', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, Fall 1975, pp. 61–80; 'Structuralist Marxism and the "Woman Question"', *Science and Society*, vol. XLII, no. 3, Fall 1978, pp. 301–23.
  43. Engels, *The Origin of the Family*.
  44. Barbara Epstein, 'Why Poststructuralism is a Dead End for Progressive Thought', *Socialist Review*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1995, pp. 83–119.
  45. Ibid., p. 83.
  46. Teresa Ebert, '(Untimely) Critiques for a Red Feminism', in Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, Teresa L. Ebert and Donald Morton, eds, *Post-ality: Marxism and Postmodernism*, Maitsonneuve Press, Washington DC, 1995, pp. 113–49.
  47. Ibid., pp. 119–21.
  48. Frederick Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, International Publishers, New York, 1940, pp. 322–3.
  49. Ebert, '(Untimely) Critiques', p. 117.
  50. Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996, p. 72.
  51. Max Weber, 'The Social Psychology of the World Religions', in Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1958, p. 284.
  52. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, cited in Ebert, '(Untimely) Critiques', p. 125.
  53. Their archived discussions can be found in their homepages. MATFEM: <http://csf.colorado.edu/matfem/> M-Fem: <http://csf.colorado.edu/m-fem/>.
  54. US Marxist Feminists tend to be theoretically less rigorous than their European counterparts and display an eclectic and pragmatic approach to Marx and Marxism, which might prompt Europeans to dismiss their efforts as at best liberal, not Marxist. While I would agree, in principle, with such an assessment with respect to some postings in M-Fem, not all of the messages can be thus described.