

A version of this paper was presented to  
the Research Committee on Alienation at the  
International Sociology Association Conference, Montreal, August 1998

## What's essential? Alienation, poststructuralism and the theorisation of 'race'

### Abstract

This article suggests the lines on which a reconciliation between a materialist and post-structuralist analyses of 'race'. It argues that a return to Marx's concept of alienation, as set out in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, is a starting point for an analysis of 'race' and racism which allows us to take the best from materialist theory and the best from postmodern theory. The following points are raised in the course of the argument:

1. The intemperate dispute between anti-racists who have turned towards post-structuralism and those who ally themselves with traditional Marxism is inappropriate: both camps have much to offer, and should treat each other with due respect.
2. Does the base-superstructure distinction matter any more? I argue, contrary to traditional Marxism, that it doesn't.
3. Does 'difference' supersede 'the universal'? The claim has been made that only by reinstating the Enlightenment's 'universalism' can a proper anti-racist sociology be created. While accepting that there are serious problems in the postmodern sociology of 'difference', I argue that the post-structuralist critique of essentialism is a crucial step forward for anti-racist theory and practice, and that universalism is not a sufficient basis for such theory and practice..
4. Which Marxist concepts can make a difference? After affirming the concepts of 'appropriation' and 'signification' as developed by Colette Guillaumin, I suggest that the concept of alienation should be re-employed to reconcile the best claims of postmodern theory with the best claims of Marxist theory, because it restores the agency of human beings as the centre-piece for social and cultural theory.
5. Is there a place for (the) soul? The article concludes with a brief discussion of 'black joy', partly to offset the miserabilism at the heart of some Marxisms and some postmodernisms.

### 1 The politics of cultural theory

I would argue, using Habermas' (1965) distinctions, that cultural theory should be understood as the systematic elaboration of a form of knowledge explicitly linked to emancipatory human interests. Its empirical work, as C Wright Mills argued for sociology even longer ago, should support the interests of the marginal and the oppressed (Eldridge, 1983). Thus, the point of doing cultural theory is to clarify the ideas that might underpin the broadest possible practice for human emancipation - i.e. the struggle for freedom from exploitation and exclusion in its myriad economic, sexual, racial, embodied and gendered forms. Although this article will concentrate on racism, it will be evident that a useful understanding of this phenomenon is inseparable from the theorisation of the other forms of oppression and exploitation. Marxist theory has been traditionally seen as the vehicle of choice for radical thinkers who wish to travel in the company of emancipatory social movements, but disputes among the passengers are now so serious that the journey is in danger of coming to a halt.

There is a manifest antagonism between those whom I shall call 'class-struggle Marxists' and some of those based in universities who work within post-structuralist paradigms which support anti-racist politics. There is much to be learned from this conflict. One case in point is the attack launched by A Sivanandan, the Director of London's Institute of Race Relations, initially on work associated with Stuart Hall, formerly of the Open University, and latterly on the Centre for New Ethnicities Research (CNER), directed by Phil Cohen.

The Institute of Race Relations (IRR) operates as a library, research centre and publisher but it is independent of the university sector. *Race and Class*, the IRR's journal, and its magazine CARF (Campaign against Racism and Fascism) are important reference points for those who want to ally scholarship with anti-racist practice. The Institute promotes analyses which are rooted in class-struggle Marxism: ontological priority is given to the reality of social-economic class. While it publishes the work of reputed academics, the disdain of its Director for ivory-tower theory is regularly expressed at conferences, and in print, with poetic force. Sivanandan's criticism of Stuart Hall's work with the 'New Times' group, associated with the British Communist Party's now defunct journal *Marxism Today*, rested on the argument that the only valid Marxist analysis was one which held firmly to the notion of economic determinism. His list of 'communities of resistance' - 'the inner cities, among the low paid and the poor, in the new underclass of homeworkers and sweatshop workers, casual and part-time workers, *ad hoc* and temporary workers . . . refugees, migrants, asylum seekers' - is a guide to those upon whom, according to Sivanandan, radical intellectuals should concentrate their analysis (Sivanandan, 1990 pp. 51-2). Useful knowledge, according to Sivanandan, is only generated when an economic Marxism is applied to the study of the most exploited workers.

More recently, Sivanandan has turned his ire on 'postmodern intellectuals' in general, and on the Centre for New Ethnicities Research (CNER), directed by Dr Phil Cohen, in particular. Taking his message to the heart of the beast, he told a conference at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts in May 1995: 'Intellectuals and academics have retreated into culturalism and ethnicism or, worse, fled into discourse and deconstruction and representation . . . The first is a retreat, the second is a betrayal'. A CNER programme, directed at an investigation of the processes by which white racists form their identities, allegedly allows these 'intellectual playboys of the western world' to 'appropriate struggle without engaging in it and, while appearing radical, to further their own interests' (Sivanandan, 1995). The IRR-based anti-racist/anti-fascist magazine has attacked Phil Cohen's use of psychoanalytic concepts in his effort to explain the formation of racist identities. His research associates at the CNER - many of whom are involved in schools and youth clubs, working alongside white people in an area of east London notorious for its (brief) election of a British National Party councillor in 1993 - have been dubbed 'the new missionaries' (CARF, December 1997/January 1998 pp. 10-12). They had been described in an earlier article as 'a gaggle of academics who seem less concerned with countering racism than in describing its representation' (CARF, October/November 1997 p. 8). The political crime they are charged with is disengagement from practical anti-racist struggle.

Their intellectual crimes are to apply those concepts associated with postmodern thought and to analyse the lives and beliefs of white racists, rather than those listed as 'communities of resistance'.

## 2 Beyond base and superstructure

To evaluate Sivanandan's critique we need to revisit the base-superstructure division so deeply embedded in Marxist theory.

Cohen writes with poetic verve which is quite the equal of Sivanandan's. He made a spirited reply to the initial attack from Sivanandan when it was published in the left-of-centre weekly magazine *New Statesman and Society*. He argued that Sivanandan was politically out of touch, advocated a 'ranting anti-racism' which drives young people away from politics and was applying an 'underclass' theory which bore no relevance to the empirical detail of young people's lives in the east end of London (Cohen, 1995). Cohen implied that Sivanandan was himself in an ivory tower, operating with a set of theories relevant to a by-gone era (and which might have parallels with anti-Semitic conspiracy theories).

This dispute has a broader theoretical context. Sivanandan's critique is well summarised in the following quote:

What New Times represents, in sum, is a shift in focus from economic determinism to cultural determinism, from changing the world to changing the word, from class in and for itself to the individual in and for him or herself. Use value has ceded to exchange value, need to choice, community to i-dentity, anti-imperialism to international humanism (Sivanandan, 1990 p. 49).

Cohen, who occasionally writes for the Democratic Left's newspaper *New Times* (which takes up many of the questions raised in *Marxism Today*) is, along with Stuart Hall, among the villains of Sivanandan's piece. Sivanandan places himself within that form of Marxism which asserts the primacy of the economic, while those who have, over the past twenty or more years, turned their focus upon the analysis of culture are, he implies, to be banished from the Marxist fold. As well as Cohen's, there are several other responses to Sivanandan's emphatic assertion of the deterministic relationship between the economic base and the ideological superstructure. One is to recall the emphasis, in all but the most vulgar of Marxisms, of the dialectical relationship between the two. Or we could re-investigate Zygmunt Bauman's notion of culture as praxis (Bauman, 1973). Another is to reassert Raymond Williams' contribution to this debate, in particular his view that 'the base' refers to 'specific activities of men [sic] in real social and economic relationships' (rather than the restricted sense of waged work-place relationships) and that 'determination' should be interpreted as 'setting limits' rather than prefiguring or controlling (Williams, 1980 p. 34).

A more recent contribution to this discussion has appeared in Judith Butler's argument that the sphere relegated by economic Marxists to the analytically subordinate position of 'the cultural' is, in fact, part of 'the material' sphere of existence (Butler 1998). Butler's intervention here is significant, because she is among the most important of the anglophone theorists whose work is saturated with postmodern and post-structuralist thought. Butler went out of her way to respond to the Marxist critique of the focus on culture which, in her summary (*ibid.* p. 34), is reminiscent of Sivanandan's, indicating that the debate in the USA is as fierce as it is in the UK, though Butler takes gender and sexuality, rather than 'race', as her focus. On materialism, Butler makes two important points. She argues that the supposedly cultural notions of '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' (*ibid.* p. 40). The economic sphere, Butler says, should be understood to include 'the social reproduction of persons' (*ibid.* p. 40). Secondly, she endorses Althusser's view that ideology is a material force (*ibid.* p. 43). Strong those these arguments are, they concede too much to the traditional Marxist distinction between base and superstructure, with its concomitant implication that the material (i.e. the economic) is the prime focus for analysis. Among Sivanandan's circle of 'true believers' (Sivanandan, 1990 p. 32), the economy is the shrine. Agnosticism seems to me a more productive position, intellectually and politically. Butler frames her argument in this form, I think, to indicate that she, like Donna Haraway, another major US thinker who has been influenced by postmodern theory (Haraway, 1991), seeks explicitly to situate her analysis within the parameters of the socialist left, positioning herself sympathetically alongside the classic concerns of Marxist theory. At the very least, class-struggle Marxists should regard them, and Hall and Cohen, as comrades, and treat them as such.

The conclusion to be drawn for the analysis of 'race' and racism is that the analytical division between base and superstructure serves no more useful purpose here than it does for the analysis of 'gender' and sexism. In fact, it is counter-productive. It falsely polarises the sociological analysis of 'race', suggesting that there is a group of theorists who 'correctly' start their analysis from the economic, while another group ignore the economic dimension altogether. As Sivanandan reluctantly acknowledges, the 'New Times' grouping pointed out that an information-based economy was replacing a 'Fordist' economy, but he claims that this is included merely as a 'walk-on part' for the economic base (Sivanandan, 1990 p. 24). In fact, their post-Fordist/post-industrial argument was central to the whole 'New Times' project. Similarly, the analyses put forward by Phil Cohen are deeply imbued with historical and materialist reasoning and evidence (Cohen, 1993, 1998). (Cohen's case for the investigation of the unconscious elements in the construction of racialised myths is powerfully, and in my view correctly made, but is only mocked, and never properly answered, by his IRR critics.)

Another important division among scholars and activists in the field of 'race' occurred in the 1980s. Significantly, this debate took place, usually, with an absence of personal hostility, despite some strongly held opposing views.

The argument was between those whom Robert Miles identified as operating within the 'race relations' paradigm and those who reject the validity of the concept of 'race', as presented within that paradigm, and who argue instead for a materialist analysis of the situations in which the notion of 'race' is constructed (Miles, 1982). The latter camp, I suggest, includes not only writers such as Hall and Cohen, but also Paul Gilroy. In *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987), Gilroy engaged in a critical but sympathetic debate with Marxist analyses of 'race' and class. In *The Black Atlantic* (1993) he concentrates on the production of a transatlantic double consciousness among Africans of the diaspora, implicitly rejecting the notion that this consciousness is determined by economic conditions. Nevertheless, only the narrowest definition of Marxism would suggest that Gilroy's is not a materialist analysis. What we see in all these writers' work is a decisive move away from the economism of those who seek to reinforce the base-superstructure distinction. Even Miles, whose early work could be criticised for economic reductionism, has developed the important concept of racialisation by application of the concepts of signification and representation pioneered by the so-called culturalists or structuralists (Miles, 1989, 1993). Later, I will suggest that application of Marx's concept of alienation has the similar merit of promoting an analysis of 'race' and racism which interweaves materialist and culturalist concepts. Apart from the comforts of orthodoxy, there seems to be nothing to be gained from maintaining the base-superstructure distinction with any rigidity. Either by adopting the Williams-Butler move of conflating all matters of production, reproduction and representation into the economic realm, or by adopting the approach to be outlined in section four of this article, we can offer a materialist-culturalist analysis which might help us to unify Marxist and postmodernist theory.

### 3 Universalism, difference and essentialism

But first we need to discuss another attack on the 'culturalists'. In a much less vituperative form, Keenan Malik, another independent black writer based in Britain, has raised a significant 'critique of postmodernist and post-structuralist theories of difference'. These theories, he argues, 'have become the backbone of contemporary anti-racist discourse' (Malik, 1996 p. 8). Acknowledging the disagreements between the various protagonists of these sometimes divergent positions, Malik says that they are, nevertheless, united in their 'critique of reason, a hostility to universalism, a rejection of humanism, an anti-realist epistemology and a radical relativism' (ibid. p 219). Linked to their anti-humanism is their opposition to essentialism (ibid. p. 247). The work of Stuart Hall is repeatedly referred to by Malik as evidence of the malign influence of postmodernism/post-structuralism on the analysis of 'race'. For reasons of space, I want to concentrate on the discussion of universalism, difference and essentialism, since Malik's critique, and his strong defence of Enlightenment thought (which has resonance with that of Habermas (1985) (see Outhwaite, 1996 pp. 121-2)), does pose a serious challenge to materialists who are sympathetic to aspects of postmodern thought.

According to Malik, the Enlightenment championed the idea of equality, and the notion of 'difference' is the product of the Romantics' refutation of the Enlightenment's commitment to science and rationality. While Enlightenment thinkers argued that 'humans were by nature rational and sociable, and that there existed a common human nature' (Malik, 1998 p. 127), the Romantics 'championed instead particularistic accounts of human difference' (Mali, 1998 p. 129). Universalism, for Malik, is the *sine qua non* of radical thought, the basis upon which the idea of equality (and the political promotion of this goal) rests. But Joan Scott (1997) has demonstrated that the opposition to feminist demands for equality in France is based precisely on the universalist claims of Enlightenment philosophy. The opponents of French feminism rest their case on the 'enlightened' French Constitution. Discussing 'race', Etienne Balibar (1990 p. 283) has argued that when racism is injected into nationalism it makes claims to universality as well as particularity. So Malik's claim that universalism is the lynch-pin of specifically egalitarian politics is open to question. Universalism (if redefined to incorporate anti-essentialism) should be seen as a necessary condition for anti-racism, but (particularly in the Enlightenment's version), it clearly is not a sufficient condition.

But his point about 'particularism' is not without force. Malik's central argument is that 'the discourse of race and the discourse of culture emerged out of the degradation of universalism' (ibid. p. 130). His account of the emergence of the concept of 'race' as Nineteenth century pseudo-scientists persistently differentiated human types and placed them in a 'natural' hierarchy, with 'Caucasians' at the top and 'Negroes' at the bottom is widely supported (see Banton, 1987, Goldberg, 1993). His hostility to the emergence in contemporary discourse of another systematic differentiation of humanity is easily understood by those who are concerned by the emergence of religious fundamentalisms and by assertions about the 'natural' qualities of people of African descent made by the Afri-centric scholars (e.g. Asante, 1990). When both of these strands come together in the form of Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam (Magida, 1996), or the Aryan Brotherhood/Christian Militia (Stern, 1996), progressive people are required to question the limits of their commitment to 'difference'.

Nor does the application of the notion of 'difference' in discussions of 'race' among radical scholars, such as that recorded in the Spring 1995 issue of the journal *Social Text*, always make reassuring reading. While some of the contributors make a point Malik would support - 'that the pursuit of pure black identities is a sad imitation of the scourge of stereotype aimed at us' (Dyson, 1995 p. 14) - others are so insistent on the 'persistence of "blackness" as the dominant point for the production and reproduction of racism in the US' (Gregory, 1995 p. 17) that, despite their clear opposition to racism, the 'difference' that is imputed to people of different skin colours appears to be indissoluble. Equality, it is therefore implied, is unattainable. For example, Kelley (1995, p. 3) writes: 'My four year old daughter has thoroughly convinced me that a color *blind* society we'll never be'. The contributors to this symposium include traditional Marxist-Leninists such as Amiri Baraka, and Stanley Aronowitz's article will warm the hearts of modern Marxists, so it would be wrong to use this issue of *Social Text* to fully substantiate Malik's

argument. Malik would probably support Gina Dent's sociology of what we might call the 'difference industry':

It might be fruitful, then, for us to consider the dominant public image of an America divided into two nations - black and white - in relationship to the work many of us do to fortify that impression, or at least to continue to render us unable to successfully combat it (Dent, 1995 p. 27).

On the other hand, elsewhere Gina Dent (1992, p. 6) has written that 'the new cultural politics of difference', as Cornel West (1993) has dubbed it, 'depend on our reconfiguring the field of representation'. By implying that changes are needed only in the field of representation (which I'm sure is not her final position), the wrath of Malik and Sivanandan will be provoked. Thus there is enough here to raise serious questions about the emphasis given to the notion of 'difference' as a main feature of anti-racist discourse.

Malik, however, sustains his argument that a (postmodern) commitment to difference precludes (an Enlightenment) commitment to equality by ignoring the critique of essentialism, another aspect of postmodern thought, originated by French structuralists in the late 1960s. Where anti-essentialism is an ontological assumption, equality as a political goal is by no means precluded, and what Malik assumes to be an epistemological commitment to 'difference' turns out to be, at worst, a political strategy in support of the rights of subordinate ethnic groups.

I shall elaborate the previous sentence in this way. Essentialism, in Diana Fuss's definition, is 'a belief in the real, true essence of things, in the invariable and fixed qualities which define the "whatness" of a given identity' (quoted by Juteau-Lee, 1995 p. 16). The denial of this assumption in social and cultural theory stems from Althusser's famous dictum that, in 1845, Marx 'broke radically with every theory that based history and politics on an essence of man' (Althusser, 1969 p. 227). Althusser denounced the view of human nature which he attributed to Marx - "communalist", concrete intersubjectivity, love, fraternity, "species being" - as a 'philosophical anthropology', a fallacious description of man's essential nature (ibid. p. 225 fn. 6). In my reading of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* I see no evidence that Marx assumed anything more of human nature than the view that, as a species, humans are social and inter-subjective, but even this assumption is ruled out by those postmodernists for whom anti-essentialism has become synonymous with the view that the new-born human is, quite literally, a blank sheet, a being which possesses no qualities until they are imposed by social forces, usually subsumed in the concept of 'power', encoded in discourse.

Whichever view you take, it is clear that anti-essentialism (either in the weak form to which I subscribe, or the strong form of the postmodernists) carries no ontological implications about human difference. In fact, in the 'strong' anti-essentialist view, all humans, in the blankness of their origins, are by definition the same. Originally, postmodernists would say, each human is equally unscripted. In the weak form, humans' 'essential sociability' carries no

assumptions about the content of their sociability: all humans are merely assumed to carry the same capacity for sociability. Many postmodern writers whose theory claims to be anti-essentialist also position themselves politically as opposed to class exploitation and colour, gender or sexual discrimination. This simple fact is ignored by their antagonists.

Postmodern/post-structural theories offer an explanation of the exploitation and oppression which is associated with the segmentation of humans into classes, ‘races’ and genders. As I shall show in the next section, there is a better explanation available. But the important contribution made by these theories should be acknowledged. First of all, via their critique of essentialism, they provide the most effective opposition to the notion that human dispositions are given by ‘nature’, allowing us to promote the most radical visions of how human thought and behaviour could be constructed. Particularly in the weak form outlined above, anti-essentialism must be a central plank in an anti-racist praxis. Second, in so doing they uncover the workings of the dominant ideologies in a much more detailed way than traditional Marxists (such as Sivanandan) have ever done. Utilising cultural and psychoanalytic concepts, these approaches reveal structural influences on ideology which are deeper than those of mere class interest. Third, they avoid the simplicities of reducing ‘race’ and gender oppression to class exploitation, thus deposing the male factory worker from his privileged position in Marxist praxis. Fourth, consequently, the radical postmodernists have developed theory, and social-political groups, in which black scholars (male and female), and feminists (black and white) have felt relatively comfortable, and to which they have made immeasurable contributions. This stands in stark contrast to the almost exclusively white, and male, circles in which traditional Marxists usually turn.

They do, however, leave us with a major problem. The paradox of a postmodern anti-racist politics which appears to reify difference opens their proponents to Malik’s charge that their advocacy of ‘difference’ places them in a direct line of descent with the racist pseudo-science of the Nineteenth Century. (A similar paradox emerges in Irigaray’s simultaneous opposition to sexism and her identification of the allegedly fundamental biological difference between men and women (Irigaray, 1987 pp. 45-50).) What Malik fails to point out, however, is that radical postmodern/post-structural thinkers are implacably opposed to racism, sexism and heterosexism. Their support for ‘strategic essentialism’ (Spivak, 1985 p. 214) is a plausible, if not entirely satisfactory, move by postmodernists who wish to both acknowledge the actually-existing differences between humans and support the day-to-day struggle for recognition (and equality) by those groups whose difference is cast as inferior within dominant discourse. Perhaps they would resolve the paradox by a manifesto for ‘the strategic pursuit of difference with the goal of equality’. Were they to do so, the resonance with the bad faith at the heart of apartheid, and the fundamentalist essentialisms at the heart of all nationalist and separatist politics, might jolt them to search for a way out of their impasse.

#### **4 Rephrasing a radical theory of ‘race’ : alienation and joy**

I now want to make a suggestion for a theoretical move which provides a firmer basis for a materialist analysis of 'race', which incorporates the achievements of the postmodern turn, and which escapes the difficulty referred to in the previous paragraph by promoting an internally consistent anti-racist politics.

A promising starting-point is the work of Collette Guillaumin (1995), which has been published in French since the early 1970s. Guillaumin is unusual in that she works simultaneously in the fields of gender and 'race' and offers a rigorous critique of oppression in both. In her contribution to the 1980 UNESCO volume of race and colonialism, she pioneered the historical examination of the emergence of the modern notion of 'race' (work followed up by, among others, Banton (1987) and Malik (1996)), she noted that this category 'acquired a connotation of naturalness' (the insight most usually associated with the postmodernists), and she introduced the concept, developed by Miles, of 'racialisation' (Guillaumin, 1980). She writes with arresting directness:

The fact that at one point in the history of the last few centuries certain social relationships came to be called 'racial' does not necessarily mean that they are so. For that to be the case 'race' would have to be a concept with a practical basis, founded in 'reality'. But it is not (ibid. p.37).

Guillaumin is a thorough-going materialist and anti-essentialist. Her theory starts from the identification of the appropriation of labour power and the construction of categories of 'race' and gender which take on the appearance of naturalness. The imposition of essentialist assumptions and processes of material appropriation account for the formation of types of social relationships which are characterised by the dominance of white men over black people (male and female) and over women (black and white). One of her co-thinkers summarises as follows:

The categories of 'race' and 'sex' are constructed in the context of specific social relations which produce distinct groups as one furnishes labour and the other benefits from it. Arbitrary signs are then used to identify these socially constituted groups, in this case, colour of skin and sexual anatomy. The processes of sexualization and racialization then function so as to allocate humans within specific social categories and positions. Thus, these categories are constructs; but, as we will now see, they are also, in a certain way, real (Juteau-Lee, 1995 p. 19).

Guillaumin thus helps us in a number of ways. First, she locates the production of racial and sexual categories firmly in the processes by which the products of human labour are expropriated by those with the power to do so. It is in the service of material exploitation that racial and gender divisions are created (as well as, of course, economic divisions). Women's exploitation in the unwaged, domestic sphere thus parallels the exploitation of the unwaged in slavery. In this, she may be aligned with Marxism. Second, she

emphasises that these divisions require a great deal of ideological work to make them stick. Since there are no essential differences between humans, people have to be persuaded that mere signs (e.g. colour of skin, type of hair, presence or absence of a penis) are sufficient to justify the allocation of the possessor of one set of signs, rather than another, into a particular position in social relationships, which he (for it is usually the male) simultaneously arranges in a hierarchy. This move aligns her with postmodernists. Her achievement, in my view, is that she synthesises the two supposedly oppositional schools of thought, and, by showing that appropriation and signification go hand-in-glove, she renders unnecessary the base-superstructure distinction.

Guillaumin offers a third advance. She provides an escape-route for those (e.g. in the *Social Text* symposium) who oppose racism, celebrate difference and are resigned to the permanence of racially signified subordination. She wrote that 'difference is an *empirical reality*' while simultaneously pointing out the essentialist fallacy, the lurking 'conception of the sexes in terms of BEING' which was creeping into the feminist discourse of difference in the late 1970s (Guillaumin, 1995 p. 239 and p. 247, emphases as in original). By this she meant that the signs that are adopted or acquired to present 'difference' are being discussed as though they are an irreplaceable feature of everyday life. Another way of putting this would be to say that these signs have been reified. It is in this sense that they are 'real'. Particularly when material gains can be had by deploying these signs to one's own advantage, it is understandable that some have a vested interest in sustaining their 'reality'. If the analytical point is accepted that these signs are, in themselves, arbitrary, and only acquire this 'real' status because they are deployed ideologically to promote the interests of certain groups, then a clear argument may emerge about whose interests these constructions actually serve. From this starting point, a consistent counter-argument - to both strategic essentialists and to those who want to achieve permanent racial or sexual separation - may be mounted, which satisfies the egalitarian strand of universalist thought: the interests of all humans are best served when these signs are afforded no particular significance. A logically consistent political struggle, based on the universalist claim to equality and the postmodern rejection of essentialism, may then be mounted.

### **Alienation**

There are, however, two problems with Guillaumin's approach which, I believe, may be addressed if we develop Marx's notion of alienation. The first problem is that of agency, and the second, which is linked, concerns the subjective dimensions of radical politics. I will now briefly show how a return to theorising alienation might help us resolve these problems.

If our starting point is the appropriation of labour by those with power, the active agent in this process is the dominator. Those whose labour is appropriated are cast as victims. The subordinated are not usually passive victims - they often actively resist and rebel - but, nevertheless, conceptually they are placed on the receiving end of the agency of others. The

ramifications of this issue for an evaluation of the whole post-structuralist/postmodernist project are much wider than the topic of this article, but it is worth noting their vulnerability to the charge of reification, whether it arises in Foucault's interest in the 'apparatus' of power, rather than its agents (Giddens, 1992, Ch. 2), or in Butler's inability to countenance the 'self' as an active part in the 'performance' of gender (Dunn, 1997). The lesser problem of victimisation is to some extent replicated in Marx's exposition of alienated labour. Where Marx wrote 'alienated labour takes away the object of production from man' (Marx, 1963 p. 128) he had in mind the act of expropriation by the owner of the equipment with which the worker labours. But the most important aspect of alienation for the purposes of this article lies in Marx's notion of self-alienation (Peterovic, 1991 p. 12, provides a useful summary). To put it crudely: humans are the agents of their own self-domination. Alienation, when it includes self-alienation, reminds us of human agency. We alienate ourselves from the 'species life', by which, in my view, Marx simply means that we deny the sociability that is the essential characteristic of the human species. Alienation should therefore be understood as an active process engaged in by us all, irrespective of class, gender, 'race', sexual orientation. In externalising ourselves, we inevitably objectify ourselves and others. While that process is inescapable - there would be no intersubjectivity if there were no real beings between whom subjectivity can flow - the conditions under which objectification, and the types of objectification that result, vary according to the social, economic and political arrangements that humans create. Because the notion of alienation entails both economic and subjective-ideological dimensions there is, again, no need for the base-superstructure dichotomy.

One corollary of this relates to the discussion of 'race'. Despite their disagreements on detailed points, scholars such as Guillaumin (1980), Fryer (1984), Banton (1987), Miles (1989), Goldberg (1993) and Malik (1996) have delineated the material-ideological circumstances in which the idea that phenotypic signs could be transformed into 'real' indicators of a position in a socially constructed hierarchy of human types. It is clear from this work that the signification of 'racial' difference is inextricably linked to the cultural and economic conditions in which the particular representations are generated. While there is no reason to suppose that racist representations will disappear entirely, racists are clearly challenged by the effort to maintain their stereotypes in conditions of late modernity, where processes of globalisation circulate cultural signs with extreme rapidity and where increased inter-territorial migration increases the likelihood of exchanges in the human gene-pool.

Two aspects of the human-political problem of alienation are relevant here. First, while self-alienation has, throughout recorded history, taken the form, say, of the construction of the idea of God, under capitalism, alienation takes on more physically destructive forms, particularly those which arise from the labour process in factories. Second, modern humans replaced religious alienation with philosophical alienation, by producing ideologies which further masked the real processes of alienation which are rampant even in a society which professes itself scientific and rational. The construction of the categories of female and black, taking place as the signifiers of those categories are

enunciated and their mental and behavioural attributes are listed; the claim that these categories are indissoluble; and the placing of the carriers of those signs into positions in a human hierarchy in which the possessors of different signs are designated as superior, can be seen as one of the most pernicious of the self-alienations that humans engage in. But Marx's revolutionary message, of course, was that, just as humans had created the delusions and dominations under which they exist, so too could they unmask and free themselves. Alienation does not have to take the forms that confront us under capitalism.

This brings me to my final point, which concerns joy and the transcending of alienation. Sociology should shed its reluctance to accept the insights of psychology, and particularly those of psychoanalysis. Alienation is a personal, as well as a social-economic phenomenon. As individuals, sociologists, like everyone else, have to confront the alienated state in which we live and work. White people are compelled to confront the particularities of their alienation from black people; men (black and white) have to confront the individual and collective aspects of their alienation from women. This requires much more work than merely acknowledging 'difference' and inequalities of power. The self-alienation of members of dominant groups lies in their eagerness to expropriate, psychologically, sexually and economically, the attributes of the Other.

How do we conceptualise the inner resources that humans develop with which they attempt to overcome alienation? Progress in identifying the agents of radical change will be improved when we gain a better understanding of the subjective dimensions of political and personal change. You do not have to spend too much time in radical circles to notice how miserable most of its members are for most of the time. Yet, as Gina Dent (1992 p. 2) reminds us, in her epigraph for one of her novels, Alice Walker quoted Mirella Ricciardi: 'black people are natural, they possess the secret of joy'. Dent counters this essentialist notion with the idea that this is a 'mythic construction' which sheds light on the black diaspora. When Trevor Huddleston, one of the founders of the British anti-apartheid movement, died, Desmond Tutu recalled that, when he first met Huddleston, he was immediately impressed by him, because he was the first white man he had ever met who laughed like an African. Tutu's remark is illuminating because it both conjures up the notion that black men have a way of laughing which is an essential characteristic of their African-ness, and that white people, or at least some white people, might possess this characteristic as well, so it cannot be unique to Africans. Both these quotes, Walker-Ricciardi's and Tutu's, do however remind us of the centrifugal force of essentialism. Dent's substitution of the notion that this feature might be mythical, rather than innate, serves only to remind us of how deeply constitutive of culture is myth (one of the points that Phil Cohen has made so well). In the same article, Dent quotes the following remark made by Cornell West at the conference whose book she edited:

[P]leasure, under commodified conditions, tends to be inward. You take it with you, and it's a highly individuated unit . . . But joy tries to cut across that. Joy tries to get to those non-market values - love, care,

kindness, service, solidarity, the struggle for justice - values that provide the possibility of bringing people together (ibid. p.1).

If joy is not the exclusive prerogative of the African diaspora, it might well be a more pervasive constitutive myth of African culture than it is of white, northern western culture. We are here, again, straying close to the ground occupied by those African-American nationalists who characterise whites as essentially cold and blacks as essentially warm. But to stray is not to join. Opposition to essentialism is quite clear in this article, and among the black theorists cited here. 'Joy' may not bear all the weight that West places upon it - joyous expressivity does not inevitably line up with love, solidarity and the struggle for justice - but it does point us towards one element in the struggle to overcome alienation. The cultivation of joy, individually and collectively, is not simply a resource for resistance, it should be a mainspring of our efforts for radical social change.

Both the pleasure and the joy to which Cornell West refers cannot ultimately escape commodification. Much of what is experienced as joyous - particularly that which arrives in religious ecstasy - might well be critiqued as mystification. Weber's view (1991 pp. 342-7) that in art, extra-marital sex and orgiastic religion we escape the iron cage might be excessively optimistic. But some of the greatest art, such as the blues and jazz, has been produced by people in the deepest state of economic and personal alienation. And, despite pervasive alienation, we are immersed in a moment in history in which two of our principal, and most destructive self-alienations, racism and sexism, are under the most serious challenge. Sociological and cultural theory which synthesises materialism with the best aspects of postmodernism should provide a useful resource for those of us who want to reinforce that challenge. Alienated we may be, but joyfully creative we can also be.

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19 July, 1999

7432 words (inc. Bibliography)