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Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?

Nancy Hartsock

If we begin with a general question about the association of power and gender, the answer would seem to be self-evident: Power is associated firmly with the male and masculinity. Commentators on power have frequently remarked on its connections with virility and masculinity.¹ Yet, efforts to change the subordinate status of women require a consideration of the nature of power. In order to change the relations of domination which structure society and define our subordination, we must understand how power works, and thus we need a usable theory of power. Where is it to be found? How is it to be developed? Are relations of power between the sexes comparable to other kinds of power relations? Or are gender relations unique, and thus must we develop a new theory to account for them? Can theories of power currently being developed in the social sciences make fruitful contributions to the analysis of power relations between the sexes? If not, how could these theories be adapted in such a way that gender relations could be adequately conceptualized?

I believe that while gender relations require specific description, much of what has been written about the relations of domination obtaining between other groups is relevant to the situation of women. One could find much common ground among theories of power which emerge from and respond to experiences of domination and subjugation. I am much less sanguine, however, about the utility of theories of power currently being developed in the social sciences. Not only do I find them not useful or fruitful for women or other oppressed groups, but I also fail to see how

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they might be reconceptualized or otherwise adapted to our needs. I have examined a number of these theories elsewhere, including the structuralist alternative proposed by Lévi-Strauss, and found them wanting.² Here, I want to argue that poststructuralist theories such as those put forward by Michel Foucault fail to provide a theory of power for women.

We must note at the outset that power is a peculiar concept, one that must be characterized as "essentially contested." That is, different theories of power rest on different assumptions about both the content of existence and the ways we come to know it. That is, different theories of power rest on differing ontologies and epistemologies, and a feminist rethinking of power requires attention to its epistemological grounding.³

I have argued elsewhere that epistemologies grow out of differing material circumstances. We must, then, distinguish between theories of power about women—theories which may include the subjugation of women as yet another variable to be considered, and theories of power for women—theories which begin from the experience and point of view of the dominated. Such theories would give attention not only to the ways women are dominated, but also to their capacities, abilities, and strengths. In particular, such theories would use these capacities as guides for a potential transformation of power relationships—that is, for the empowerment of women. I should add as a qualification that I refer to the empowerment of women as a group, not simply a few women "making it." One might make similar cases for other marginalized groups.

But to mention the power of women leads immediately to the problem of what is meant by "women." The problem of differences among women has been very prominent in the United States in recent years. We face the task of developing our understanding of difference as part of the theoretical task of developing a theory of power for women. Issues of difference reminds us as well that many of the factors which divide women also unite some women with men—factors such as racial or cultural differences. Perhaps theories of power for women will also be theories of power for other groups as well. We need to develop our understanding of difference by creating a situation in which hitherto marginalized groups can name themselves, speak for themselves, and participate in defining the terms of interaction, a situation in which we can construct an understanding of the world that is sensitive to difference.

What might such a theory look like? Can we develop a general theory, or should we abandon the search for such a theory in favor of making space for a number of heterogeneous voices to be heard? What kinds of common claims can be made about the situations of women and men of color? About those of white women and women and men of color? About the situations of Western peoples and those they have colonized? For

example, is it ever legitimate to say "women" without qualification? These kinds of questions make it apparent that the situation we face involves not only substantive claims about the world, but also raises questions about how we come to know the world, about what we can claim for our theories and ultimately about who "we" are. I want to ask what kinds of knowledge claims are required for grounding political action by different groups. Should theories produced by "minorities" rest on different epistemologies than those of the "majority?" Given the fact that the search for theory has been called into question in majority discourse and has been denounced as totalizing, do we want to ask similar questions of minority proposals or set similar standards?

In our efforts to find ways to include the voices of marginalized groups, one might expect helpful guidance from those who have argued against totalizing and universalistic theories such as those of the Enlightenment. Many radical intellectuals have been attracted to a compilation of diverse writings ranging from literary criticism to the social sciences, generally termed postmodern. The writers, among them figures such as Foucault, Derrida, Rorty, and Lyotard, argue against the faith in a universal reason we have inherited from Enlightenment European philosophy. They reject stories that claim to encompass all of human history: As Lyotard puts it, "let us wage war on totality."⁴ In its place they propose a social criticism that is *ad hoc*, contextual, plural, and limited. A number of feminist theorists have joined in the criticism of modernity put forward by these writers. They have endorsed their claims about what can and cannot be known or said or read into/from texts.

Despite their apparent congruence with the project I am proposing, I will argue these theories would hinder rather than help its accomplishment. Despite their own desire to avoid universal claims and despite their stated opposition to these claims, some universalistic assumptions creep back into their work. Thus, postmodernism, despite its stated efforts to avoid the problems of European modernism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at best manages to criticize these theories without putting anything in their place. For those of us who want to understand the world systematically in order to change it, postmodern theories at their best give little guidance. (I should note that I recognize that some postmodernist theorists are committed to ending injustice. But this commitment is not carried through in their theories.) Those of us who are not part of the ruling race, class, or gender, not a part of the minority which controls our world, need to know how it works. Why are we—in all our variousness—systematically excluded and marginalized?⁵ What systematic changes would be required to create a more just society? At worst, postmodernist theories can recapitulate the effects of Enlightenment theories which deny

the right to participate in defining the terms of interaction. Thus, I contend, in broad terms, that postmodernism represents a dangerous approach for any marginalized group to adopt.

The Construction of the Colonized Other

In thinking about how to think about these issues, I found that the work of Albert Memmi in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* was very useful as a metaphor for understanding both our situation with regard to postmodernist theorists and the situation of some postmodernist theorists themselves: Those of us who have been marginalized enter the discussion from a position analogous to that which the colonized holds in relation to the colonizer. Most fundamentally, I want to argue that the philosophical and historical creation of a devalued "Other" was the necessary precondition for the creation of the transcendental rational subject outside of time and space, the subject who is the speaker in Enlightenment philosophy. Simone de Beauvoir has described the essence of the process in a quite different context: "Evil is necessary to Good, Matter to Idea, and Darkness to Light."⁶ While this subject is clearest in the work of bourgeois philosophers such as Kant, one can find echoes of this mode of thought in some of Marx's claims about the proletariat as the universal subject of history.

Memmi described the bond that creates both the colonizer and the colonized as one which destroys both parties, although in different ways. As he draws a portrait of the Other as described by the colonizer, the colonized emerges as the image of everything the colonizer is not. Every negative quality is projected onto her/him. The colonized is said to be lazy, and the colonizer becomes practically lyrical about it. Moreover, the colonized is both wicked and backward, a being who is in some important ways not fully human.⁷ As he describes the image of the colonized, feminist readers of de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* cannot avoid a sense of familiarity. We recognize a great deal of this description.⁸

Memmi points to several conclusions drawn about this artificially created Other. First, the Other is always seen as "Not," as a lack, a void, as lacking in the valued qualities of the society, whatever those qualities may be.⁹ Second, the humanity of the Other becomes "opaque." Colonizers can frequently be heard making statements such as "you never know what they think. Do they think? Or do they instead operate according to intuition?" (Feminist readers may be reminded of some of the arguments about whether women had souls, or whether they were capable of reason or of learning Latin.) Memmi remarks ironically that the colonized must indeed be very strange, if he remains so mysterious and opaque after years of living with the colonizer. Third, the Others are not seen as fellow individual members of the human community, but rather as part of a

chaotic, disorganized, and anonymous collectivity. They carry, Memmi states, "the mark of the plural."¹⁰ In more colloquial terms, they all look alike.

I want to stress once again that I am not claiming that women are a unitary group or that Western white women have the same experiences as women or men of color or as colonized peoples. Rather, I am pointing to a way of looking at the world characteristic of the dominant white, male, Eurocentric ruling class, a way of dividing up the world that puts an omnipotent subject at the center and constructs marginal Others as sets of negative qualities.

What is left of the Other after this effort to dehumanize her or him? She/he is pushed toward becoming an object. As an end, in the colonizer's supreme ambition, she/he should exist only as a function of the needs of the colonizer, that is, be transformed into a pure colonized. An object for himself or herself as well as for the colonizer.¹¹ The colonized ceases to be a subject of history and becomes only what the colonizer is not. After having shut the colonized out of history and having forbidden him all development, the colonizer asserts his fundamental immobility.¹² Confronted with this image as it is imposed by every institution and in every human contact, the colonized cannot be indifferent to this picture. Its accusations worry the colonized even more because she/he admires and fears the powerful colonizing accuser.

We can expand our understanding of the way this process works by looking briefly at Edward Said's account of the European construction of the Orient. He makes the political dimensions of this ideological move very clear: Said describes the creation of the Orient as an outgrowth of a will to power. "Orientalism," he states, "is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."¹³

Interestingly enough, in the construction of these power relations, the Orient is often feminized. There is, however, the creation—out of this same process of the opposite of the colonized, the opposite of the Oriental, the opposite of women—of a being who sees himself as located at the center and possessed of all the qualities valued in his society (I use the masculine pronoun here purposely). Memmi describes this process eloquently:

... the colonialist stresses those things that keep him separate rather than emphasizing that which might contribute to the foundation of a joint community. In those differences, the colonized is always degraded and the colonialist finds justification for rejecting his subjectivity. But perhaps the most important thing is that once the behavioral feature or historical or geographical factor which characterizes the colonialist and contrasts him with the colonized has been isolated, this gap must be

kept from being filled. The colonialist removes the factor from history, time and therefore possible evolution. What is actually a sociological point becomes labeled as being biological, or preferably, metaphysical. It is attached to the colonized's basic nature. Immediately the colonial relationship between colonized and colonizer, founded on the essential outlook of the two protagonists, becomes a definitive category. It is what it is because they are what they are, and neither one nor the other will ever change.¹⁰

Said points to something very similar. He argues that "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self."¹⁵ Orientalism is part of the European identity that defines "us" versus the nonEuropeans. To go further, the studied object becomes another being with regard to whom the studying subject becomes transcendent. Why? Because, unlike the Oriental, the European observer is a true human being.¹⁶

But what does all this have to do with theory and the search for a theory of power for women? I want to suggest that in each of these cases—and the examples could be multiplied—what we see is the construction of the social relations, the power relations, which form the basis of the transcendent subject of Enlightenment theories—he (and I mean *he*) who theorizes. Put slightly differently, the political and social as well as ideological/intellectual creation of the devalued Other was at the same time the creation of the universalizing and totalizing voice postmodernists denounce as the voice of theory.

These social relations and the totalizing voice they constitute are memorialized as well in the rules of formal logic. As Nancy Jay points out, the rules of logic we have chosen to inherit must be seen as principles of order. She calls attention to the principle of identity (if anything is A it is A), the principle of contradiction (nothing can be both A and not-A), and the principle of the excluded middle (anything and everything must be either A or not-A). She notes: "These principles are not representative of the empirical world; they are principles of order. In the empirical world, almost everything is in a process of transition: growing, decaying, ice turning to water and vice versa."¹⁷

These logical principles of order underlie the pattern of thought I have been describing, a pattern which divides the world into A and not-A. The not-A side is regularly associated with disorder, irrationality, chance, error, impurity. Not-A is necessarily impure, a random catchall kind of category. The clue, Jay notes, is the presence of only one positive term. Thus, men/women/children is one form of categorizing the world, while men/women-and-children is quite different in implication.¹⁸ Radical dichotomy, then, functions to maintain order. The questions posed elo-

quently in the literature I have been examining are these: In whose interest is it to preserve dichotomies? Who experiences change as disorder?¹⁹ The central point I want to make is that the creation of the Other is simultaneously the creation of the transcendent and omnipotent theorizer who can persuade himself that he exists outside time and space and power relations.

The social relations which express and form a material base for these theoretical notions have been rejected on a world scale over the last several decades. Decolonization struggles, movements of young people, women's movements, racial liberation movements—all these represent the diverse and disorderly Others beginning to demand to be heard and beginning to chip away at the social and political power of the theorizer. These movements have two fundamental intellectual theoretical tasks—one of critique and the other of construction. We who have not been allowed to be subjects of history, who have not been allowed to make our history, are beginning to reclaim our pasts and remake our futures on our own terms.

One of our first tasks is the construction of the subjectivities of the Others, subjectivities which will be both multiple and specific. Nationalism and separatism are important features of this phase of construction. Bernice Reagon (civil rights movement activist, feminist, singer with the band Sweet Honey in the Rock, and social historian with the Smithsonian) describes the process and its problems eloquently:

[Sometimes] it gets too hard to stay out in that society all the time. And that's when you find a place, and you try to bar the door and check all the people who come in. You come together to see what you can do about shouldering up all of your energies so that you and your kind can survive . . . [T]hat space should be a nurturing space where you sift out what people are saying about you and decide who you really are. And you take the time to try to construct within yourself and within your community who you would be if you were running society . . . [This is] nurturing, but it is also nationalism. At a certain stage, nationalism is crucial to a people if you are ever going to impact as a group in your own interest.²

Somehow it seems highly suspicious that it is at the precise moment when so many groups have been engaged in "nationalisms" which involve redefinitions of the marginalized Others that suspicions emerge about the nature of the "subject," about the possibilities for a general theory which can describe the world, about historical "progress." Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic? Just when we are forming our own theories about the world, uncertainty emerges

about whether the world can be theorized. Just when we are talking about the changes we want, ideas of progress and the possibility of systematically and rationally organizing human society become dubious and suspect. Why is it only now that critiques are made of the will to power inherent in the effort to create theory? I contend that these intellectual moves are no accident (but no conspiracy either). They represent the transcendental voice of the Enlightenment attempting to come to grips with the social and historical changes of the middle-to-late twentieth century.

However, the particular forms its efforts have taken indicate a failure of imagination and reflect the fact that dominant modes of thought are imprisoned within Enlightenment paradigms and values. But these are simply questions. Let us look more closely at one effort to describe the tasks we are told to engage in if we adopt the postmodernist project.

Foucault's Resistance and Refusal

Foucault represents one of the several figures in Memmi's landscape. I have so far spoken only of the colonizer and the colonized, and these are indeed the basic structural positions. But Memmi makes an important distinction between the colonizer who accepts and the colonizer who refuses. If, as a group, modernist theories represent the views of the colonizer who accepts, postmodernist ideas can be divided between those who, like Richard Rorty, ignore the power relations involved, and those, like Foucault, who resist these relations. Foucault, I would argue, represents Memmi's colonizer who refuses and thus exists in a painful ambiguity. He is, therefore, a figure who also fails to provide an epistemology which is usable for the task of revolutionizing, creating, and constructing.²¹

Memmi states that as a Jewish Tunisian he knew the colonizer as well as the colonized, and so "understood only too well (the difficulty of the colonizer who refuses) their inevitable ambiguity and the resulting isolation; more serious still, their inability to act."²² He notes that it is difficult to escape from a concrete situation and to refuse its ideology while continuing to live in the midst of the concrete relations of a culture. The colonizer who attempts it is a traitor, but he is still not the colonized.²³ The political ineffectiveness of the Left Colonizer comes from the nature of his position in the colony. Has one, Memmi asks, ever seen a serious political demand which did not rest on concrete supports of people or money or force? The colonizer who refuses to become a part of his group fellow citizens faces the difficult political question of who might he be.²⁴

This lack of certainty and power infuses Foucault's work most profoundly in his methodological texts. He is clearly rejecting any form of totalizing discourse: Reason, he argues, must be seen as born from chaos,

truth as simply an error hardened into unalterable form in the long process of history. He argues for a glance that disperses and shatters the unity of man's being through which he sought to extend his sovereignty.²⁵ That is, Foucault appears to endorse a rejection of modernity. Moreover, he has engaged in social activism around prisons. His sympathies are obviously with those over whom power is exercised, and he suggests that many struggles can be seen as linked to the revolutionary working-class movement.

In addition, his empirical critiques in works such as *Discipline and Punish* powerfully unmask coercive power. Yet, they do so on the one hand by making use of the values of humanism that he claims to be rejecting: That is, as Nancy Fraser points out, the project gets its political force from "the reader's familiarity with and commitment to modern ideals of autonomy, dignity, and human rights."²⁶ Moreover, Foucault explicitly attempts to limit the power of his critique by arguing that unmasking power can have only destabilizing rather than transformative effects.²⁷ But the sense of powerlessness and the isolation of the colonial intellectual resurfaces again and again. Thus, Foucault argues that:

Humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination.²⁸

Moreover, Foucault sees intellectuals as working only alongside rather than as those who struggle for power, working locally and regionally. Finally, in opposition to modernity, he calls for a history that is parodic, dissociative, and satirical. These must be seen as positive steps. Foucault is attempting to oppose the establishment of the relations of the colonizer to the colonized. But what is the positive result?

Foucault is a complex thinker whose situation as a colonizer who resists imposes even more complexity and ambiguity on his ideas. I do not pretend to present a comprehensive account of his work here, but rather to make just two arguments. First, despite his obvious sympathy for those who are subjugated in various ways, he writes from the perspective of the dominator, "the self-proclaimed majority." Second and related, perhaps in part because power relations are less visible to those who are in a position to dominate others, systematically unequal relations of power ultimately vanish from Foucault's account of power—a strange and ironic charge to make against someone who is attempting to illuminate power relations.

Before I make these arguments I should insert some qualifications. It should be noted that Foucault himself may recognize that he is in the

position of the colonizer who resists. He recognizes that the last ten to fifteen years have changed some features of the intellectual landscape. He notes that the most recent period has been characterized by a variety of dispersed and discontinuous offensives and an "insurrection of subjugated knowledges."²⁹ He adds that what has emerged is a sense of

... the increasing vulnerability to criticism of things, institutions, practices, discourses. A certain fragility has been discovered in the very bedrock of existence . . . even . . . [those] aspects of it that are most familiar, most solid, and most intimately related to our bodies and to our everyday behavior.³

At another point in the essay cited, he refers to contemporary intellectuals as "fragile inheritors." Thus, one might argue that Foucault himself recognizes the effects of decolonization and the revolt of many dominated groups. All this can only make my argument, that he does not offer a theory of power adequate to the analysis of gender, more difficult to support.

I will go even further and note that Foucault makes a number of important contributions to our understanding of contemporary social relations. One can cite his accounts of the development of the confession as a means of producing power by requiring those who are to be dominated to take the initiative. One can note as well his substitution of domination/subjugation for the traditional problem of sovereignty/obedience. In addition, his development of the concept of disciplinary power, a power which possesses, in a sense, the same possibilities for expansion as capital itself, marks a major advance. One might continue to enumerate his contributions, but I will leave that to his disciples. Instead, what I want to argue here is that Foucault reproduces in his work the situation of the colonizer who resists [and in so doing renders his work inadequate and even irrelevant to the needs of the colonized or the dominated]. So, let me return to the two central points I want to make.

Foucault's Perspective

In sum, reading Foucault persuades me that Foucault's world is not my world but is instead a world in which I feel profoundly alien. Indeed, when he argues that this is our world, I am reminded of a joke told about two U.S. comic book figures—the Lone Ranger and Tonto, "his faithful Indian companion" (and subordinate). As the story goes, the two are chased and then surrounded by hostile Indians. As he comes to recognize their danger, the Lone Ranger turns to Tonto and asks, "What do we do now?" To which Tonto replies, "What do you mean, 'we,' white boy?"

Foucault's is a world in which things move, rather than people, a world in which subjects become obliterated or, rather, recreated as passive objects, a world in which passivity or refusal represent the only possible choices. Thus, Foucault writes, the confession "detached itself" from religion and "emigrated" toward pedagogy,³¹ or he notes that "hypotheses offer themselves."³² Moreover, he argues that subjects not only cease to be sovereign but also that external forces such as power are given access even to the body and thus are the forces which constitute the subject as a kind of effect.³³

One commentator has argued that one's concept of power is importantly shaped by the reason why one wishes to think about power in the first place. He goes on to set several possibilities. First, you might imagine what you could do if you had power. Second, you might speculate about what you would imagine if you had power. Third, you might want to assess what power you would need to initiate a new order. Or, fourth, you might want to postulate a range of things outside any form of power we presently understand. Foucault, he argues correctly, is attracted by the first two. Thus, Foucault's imagination of power is "with" rather than "against" power.³⁴ Said gives no "textual" evidence to support his assertions. But I believe there are a number of indications that Foucault is "with power," that is, understands the world from the perspective of the ruling group. First, from the perspective of the ruling group, other "knowledges" would appear to be illegitimate or "not allowed to function within official knowledge," as Foucault himself says of workers' knowledge.³⁵ They would appear to be, as Foucault has variously categorized them, "insurrectionary," "disordered," "fragmentary," lacking "autonomous life."³⁶ To simply characterize the variety of "counter-discourses" or "antisciences" as nonsystematic negates the fact that they rest on organized and indeed material bases.³⁷ Second, and related, Foucault calls only for resistance and exposure of the system of power relations. Moreover, he is often vague about what exactly this means. Thus, he argues only that one should "entertain the claims" of subjugated knowledges or bring them "into play."³⁸ Specifically, he argues that the task for intellectuals is less to become part of movements for fundamental change and more to struggle against the forms of power that can transform these movements into instruments of domination.

Perhaps this stress on resistance rather than transformation is due to Foucault's profound pessimism. Power appears to him as ever expanding and invading. It may even attempt to "annex" the counter-discourses that have developed.³⁹ The dangers of going beyond resistance to power are nowhere more clearly stated than in Foucault's response to one interviewer who asked what might replace the present system. He responded that to even imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present

system. Even more sinister, he added that perhaps this is what happened in the Soviet Union, thus suggesting that Stalinism might be the most likely outcome of efforts at social transformation.⁴⁰ Foucault's insistence on simply resisting power is carried even further in his arguments that one must avoid claims to scientific knowledge. In particular, one should not claim Marxism as a science because to do so would invest it with the harmful effects of the power of science in modern culture.⁴¹ Foucault then, despite his stated aims of producing an account of power which will enable and facilitate resistance and opposition, instead adopts the position of what he has termed official knowledge with regard to the knowledge of the dominated and reinforces the relations of domination in our society by insisting that those of us who have been marginalized remain at the margins.

The Evanescence of Power

Despite Foucault's efforts to develop an account of power, and precisely because of his perspective as the colonizer who resists, systematic power relations ultimately vanish in his work. This may be related to my first point: Domination, viewed from above, is more likely to appear as equality. Foucault has a great deal to say about what exactly he means by power. Power

must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they effect.⁴²

(A very complicated definition.) He goes on to argue that power is "permanent, repetitious, and self reproducing. It is not a thing acquired but rather exists in its exercise. Moreover, power relations are not separate from other relations but are contained within them." At the same time (and perhaps contradictorily) power relations are both intentional and subjective, although Foucault is careful to point out that there is no headquarters which sets the direction.⁴³ His account of power is perhaps unique in that he argues that wherever there is power, there is resistance.

Much of what Foucault has to say about power stresses the systemic nature of power and its presence in multiple social relations. At the same time, however, his stress on heterogeneity and the specificity of each situation leads him to lose track of social structures and instead to focus

on how individuals experience and exercise power. Individuals, he argues, circulate among the threads of power. They "are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power."⁴⁴ Individuals are to be seen not as an atom which power strikes, but rather the fact that certain bodies and discourses are constituted as individuals is an effect of power. Thus, power must not be seen as either a single individual dominating others or as one group or class dominating others.⁴⁵

With this move Foucault has made it very difficult to locate domination, including domination in gender relations. He has on the one hand claimed that individuals are constituted by power relations, but he has argued against their constitution by relations such as the domination of one group by another. That is, his account makes room only for abstract individuals, not women, men, or workers.

Foucault takes yet another step toward making power disappear when he proposes the image of a net as a way to understand power. For example, he argues that the nineteenth-century family should be understood as a "network of pleasures and powers linked together at multiple points," a formulation which fails to take account of the important power differentials within the family.⁴⁶ The image of the net ironically allows (even facilitates) his ignoring of power relations while claiming to elucidate them. Thus, he argues that power is exercised generally through a "net-like organization" and that individuals "circulate between its threads."⁴⁷ Domination is not a part of this image; rather, the image of a network in which we all participate carries implications of equality and agency rather than the systematic domination of the many by the few. Moreover, at times Foucault seems to suggest that not only are we equals but that those of us at the bottom are in some sense responsible for our situations: Power, he argues, comes from below. There is no binary opposition between rulers and ruled, but rather manifold relations of force that take shape in the machinery of production, or families, and so forth, and then become the basis for "wide ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole."⁴⁸ Certainly in the analysis of power, Foucault argues that rather than begin from the center or the top—the sovereignty—one should conduct an ascending analysis of power, starting from the "infinitesimal mechanisms" which each have their own history. One can then see how these have been colonized and transformed into more global forms of domination. It is certainly true that dominated groups participate in their own domination. But rather than stop with the fact of participation, we would learn a great deal more by focusing on the means by which this participation is exacted. Foucault's argument for an "ascending analysis" of power could lead us to engage in a version of blaming the victim.

Finally, Foucault asserts that power must be understood as "capillary," that it must be analyzed at its extremities.⁴⁹ He gives the example of

locating power not in sovereignty but in local material institutions, such as torture and imprisonment. But the image of capillary power is one which points to the conclusion that power is everywhere. After all, in physical terms, where do we not have capillaries? Indeed, Foucault frequently uses language which argues that power "pervades the entire social body," or is "omnipresent."⁵⁰ Thus, all of social life comes to be a network of power relations—relations which should be analyzed not at the level of large-scale social structures but rather at very local, individual levels. Moreover, Foucault notes important resemblances between such diverse things as schools and prisons, or the development of sexuality in the family and the institutions of "perversion." The whole thing comes to look very homogeneous. Power is everywhere, and so ultimately nowhere.

In the end, Foucault appears to endorse a one-sided wholesale rejection of modernity and to do so without a conception of what is to replace it. Indeed, some have argued persuasively that because Foucault refuses both the ground of foundationalism and the "ungrounded hope" endorsed by liberals such as Rorty, he stands on no ground at all and thus fails to give any reasons for resistance. Foucault suggests that if our resistance succeeded, we would simply be changing one discursive identity for another and in the process create new oppressions.⁵¹

The "majority" and those like Foucault who adopt the perspective of the "majority" or the powerful can probably perform the greatest possible political service by resisting and by refusing the overconfidence of the past. But the message we get from them is either that we should abandon the project of modernity and substitute a conversation (as Richard Rorty suggests) or that we should simply take up a posture of resistance as the only strategy open to us. But if we are not to abandon the project of creating a new and more just society, neither of these options will work for us.

Toward Theories for Women

Those of us who have been marginalized by the transcendental voice of universalizing theory need to do something other than ignore power relations as Rorty does or resist them as figures such as Foucault and Lyotard suggest. We need to transform them, and to do so, we need a revised and reconstructed theory (indebted to Marx among others) with several important features.

First, rather than getting rid of subjectivity or notions of the subject, as Foucault does and substituting his notion of the individual as an effect of power relations, we need to engage in the historical, political, and theoretical process of constituting ourselves as subjects as well as objects of history. We need to recognize that we can be the makers of history as well

as the objects of those who have made history. Our nonbeing was the condition of being of the One, the center, the taken-for-granted ability of one small segment of the population to speak for all; our various efforts to constitute ourselves as subjects (through struggles for colonial independence, racial and sexual liberation struggles, and so on) were fundamental to creating the preconditions for the current questioning of universalist claims. But, I believe, we need to sort out who we really are. Put differently, we need to dissolve the false "we" I have been using into its real multiplicity and variety and out of this concrete multiplicity build an account of the world as seen from the margins, an account which can expose the falseness of the view from the top and can transform the margins as well as the center. The point is to develop an account of the world which treats our perspectives not as subjugated or disruptive knowledges, but as primary and constitutive of a different world.

It may be objected that I am calling for the construction of another totalizing and falsely universal discourse. But that is to be imprisoned by the alternatives imposed by Enlightenment thought and postmodernism: Either one must adopt the perspective of the transcendental and disembodied voice of "reason" or one must abandon the goal of accurate and systematic knowledge of the world. Other possibilities exist and must be (perhaps can only be) developed by hitherto marginalized voices. Moreover, our history of marginalization will work against creating a totalizing discourse. This is not to argue that oppression creates "better" people: On the contrary, the experience of domination and marginalization leaves many scars. Rather, it is to note that marginalized groups are far less likely to mistake themselves for the universal "man." We are well aware that we are not the universal man who can assume his experience of the world is the experience of all. But even if we will not make the mistake of assuming our experience of the world is the experience of all, we still need to name and describe our diverse experiences. What are our commonalities? What are our differences? How can we transform our imposed Otherness into a self-defined specificity?

Second, we must do our work on an epistemological base that indicates that knowledge is possible—not just conversation or a discourse on how it is that power relations work. Conversation as a goal is fine; understanding how power works in oppressive societies is important. But if we are to construct a new society, we need to be assured that some systematic knowledge about our world and ourselves is possible. Those (simply) critical of modernity can call into question whether we ever really knew the world (and a good case can be made that "they" at least did not). They are in fact right that they have not known the world as it is rather than as they wished and needed it to be; they created their world not only in their own image but in the image of their fantasies. To create a world that

expresses our own various and diverse images, we need to understand how it works.

Third, we need a theory of power that recognizes that our practical daily activity contains an understanding of the world—subjugated perhaps, but present. Here I am reaffirming Gramsci's argument that everyone is an intellectual and that each of us has an epistemology. The point, then, for "minority" theories is to "read out" the epistemologies in our various practices. I have argued elsewhere for a "standpoint" epistemology—an account of the world with great similarities to Marx's fundamental stance. While I would modify some of what I argued there, I would still insist that we must not give up the claim that material life (class position in Marxist theory) not only structures but sets limits on the understanding of social relations, and that, in systems of domination, the vision available to the rulers will be both partial and will reverse the real order of things.

Fourth, our understanding of power needs to recognize the difficulty of creating alternatives. The ruling class, race, and gender actively structure the material-social relations in which all the parties are forced to participate; their vision, therefore, cannot be dismissed as simply false or misguided. In consequence, the oppressed groups must struggle for their own understandings which will represent achievements requiring both theorizing and the education which grows from political struggle.

Fifth, as an engaged vision, the understanding of the oppressed exposes the relations among people as inhuman and thus contains a call to political action. That is, a theory of power for women, for the oppressed, is not one that leads to a turning away from engagement but rather one that is a call for change and participation in altering power relations.

The critical steps are, first, using what we know about our lives as a basis for critique of the dominant culture and, second, creating alternatives. When the various "minority" experiences have been described and when the significance of these experiences as a ground for critique of the dominant institutions and ideologies of society is better recognized, we will have at least the tools to begin to construct an account of the world sensitive to the realities of race and gender as well as class. To paraphrase Marx, the point is to change the world, not simply to redescribe ourselves or reinterpret the world yet again.

Notes

1. See, for example, David Bell, *Power, Influence, and Authority* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 8.
2. See my book *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism* (New York: Longman, 1983; Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1984).

3. My point here is similar to W. B. Gallie's argument that power is an "essentially contested" concept. Power can be categorized as such a concept because it is internally complex, open, and used both aggressively and defensively. Gallie, however, seems not to recognize the epistemological implications of his position.
4. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 81.
5. My language requires that I insert qualification and clarification: I will be using a *we/they* language. But while it is clear that "they" represent the ruling race, class, and gender, the "we" refers to a "we" who are not and will never be a unitary group, a "we" artificially constructed by the totalizing, Eurocentric, masculine discourse of the Enlightenment. I do not mean to suggest that white Western women share the material situation of the colonized peoples, but rather to argue that we share similar positions in the ideology of the Enlightenment.
6. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Knopf, 1953), p. 72.
7. Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 82.
8. For example, compare de Beauvoir's statement that "at the moment when man asserts himself as subject and free being, the idea of the other arises." (de Beauvoir, 1953, p. 73).
9. Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, p. 83.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 92, 95, 113.
13. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Press, 1978), p. 3.
14. Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, pp. 71-72.
15. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 3-8.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 97, 108. See also the reference to the tyrannical observer.
17. Nancy Jay, "Gender and Dichotomy," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Spring 1981, p. 42.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
19. This is Jay's question which I have made my own.
20. Bernice Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," *Home Girls*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983), p. 359.
21. My argument about Foucault comes from a much more lengthy chapter on him in my forthcoming publication, *Post-Modernism and Political Chance*.
22. Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, pp. xiv-xv.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

24. Ibid., p. 41.
25. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 139-164.
26. Nancy Fraser, "Foucault's Body Language: A Post-Humanist Political Rhetoric?" *Salmagundi*, Vol. 61, Fall 1983, p. 59.
27. Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," *Political Theory*, Vol. 12, May 1984, pp. 175-176.
28. Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 151.
29. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), pp. 79, 81.
30. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* p. 80.
31. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 68.
32. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p. 91.
33. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, pp. 142-143.
34. Edward Said, "Foucault and the Imagination of Power," *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Hoy (New York: Pantheon, 1986), p. 151.
35. Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, p. 219.
36. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, pp. 81, 85-86.
37. Said, "Foucault and the Imagination of Power," p. 154.
38. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, pp. 83, 85.
39. Ibid., p. 88.
40. Foucault, *Language Counter-Memory, Practice*, p. 230.
41. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, pp. 84-85.
42. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, pp. 92-93.
43. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p. 97.
44. Ibid., p. 98.
45. Ibid.
46. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 45.
47. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p. 98.
48. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 94.
49. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p. 95.
50. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, pp. 92-93.
51. Gad Horowitz, "The Foucaultian Impasse: No Sex, No Self, No Revolution," *Political Theory*, Vol. 16, No. 1, February 1987, pp. 63-64.

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