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Categorial Theory: A Response to Aijaz Ahmad

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flated” because “Feminism is a politics. Postmodernism is not.” (167, 168). And this is because postmodernism has no theory of agency, no strategy of resistance and no way to transform the structures of meaning that it so brilliantly exposes and critiques.

Gayatri Spivak’s much-quoted essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., **Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture**, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988; \$18.95), addresses these problems. But her complex resolution is ultimately available only to intellectuals. Others are apparently left to define their political categories and strategies by the “strategic use of positivist essentialism” that she proposes in her introduction to **Selected Subaltern Studies** (Ranjit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., New York: Oxford University Press, 1987; \$12.95) (13).

For those concerned with the Middle East, nothing exposes the political disabilities of postmodernism more than Jean Baudrillard’s article in *The Guardian* arguing that the Gulf war existed “only as a figment of mass-media simulation, war games rhetoric or imaginary scenarios which exceeded all the limits of real-world, factual possibility.” Christopher Norris opens and closes his **Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War** (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992: \$9.95) with a critique of Baudrillard. Rather than disregarding Baudrillard as absurd and irrelevant, Norris takes him on because he believes that engaging Baudrillard in terms of the Gulf war “brings home... the depth of ideological *complicity* that exists between such forms of extreme anti-realist or irrationalist doctrine and the crisis of moral and political nerve” of the left (27). Norris, like Hutcheon, rejects the excess of those who argue that historical events have no reality outside texts, although both agree that they are given meaning through texts. This fine difference limits what can be considered a valid representation, preserves the epistemological distinction between truth and

falsehood and makes it possible to argue ethically.

Norris also argues, similarly to Spivak and in opposition to Baudrillard, that Derridean deconstruction “sustains the impulse of enlightenment critique even while subjecting the tradition to a radical re-assessment of its grounding concepts and categories” (17) and maintains “a scrupulous regard for the protocols of reasoned argument and an ethics of open dialogical exchange” (34). Viewing deconstruction as an internal critique of the Enlightenment allows it to be deployed as a tool of cultural critique by many who share Norris’s dismay with postmodernist excesses. This strategy cannot determine when it is appropriate to suspend the intellectual conversation about meaning and draw a political line, but it preserves the possibility of doing so. It is clear that the Gulf war required such a response.

A dialogue is required between advocates of Marxian political economy and postmodern cultural theory because of the apparent inability of the working class to play the role designated for it in Marxist theory; because of cultural and political changes in recent years that call into question the viability of oppositional political practices associated with both

## Categorical Theory

### A response to Aijaz Ahmad

Aijaz Ahmad’s book *In Theory* helpfully reminds us of the continuing relevance of political-economic analysis. Current discussions on postcolonialism or postmodernism often privilege libidinal over political economies and thus overlook the global distribution of material privilege that goes some way towards determining why some voices will be heard more than others. To the extent that we forget the material dimensions of the conditions that make for academic-intellectual production, the reminder is timely and valuable.

That said, however, it is not clear how far a moralistic Marxist critique

Marxism and liberalism; and because of the inadequacy of Marxist theory about the nature of human difference. There is a basis for such a dialogue because, in addition to their shared opposition to bourgeois society, many Marxists and postmodern literary deconstructionists can agree that language represents its referent only through a series of cultural filters, and that interpretations so constructed are never fully aware of their own meanings. Both can reject scientific positivism and agree that events have no single determination. Both can appreciate how postmodern cultural critique undermines the apparently natural and common sense character of dominant cultural representations and exposes the political interests in which they are embedded.

Cultural theory devoid of political economy lacks critical power and can easily become a form of entertainment for intellectuals who have no social commitments beyond the academy. We cannot, however, resuscitate the kind of Marxism Terry Eagleton advocates, despite its intellectual elegance. But developing an historically informed, holistic conception of society—tentative and subject to change as it must be—can be a powerful tool for understanding and political action. ■

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of postmodern and postcolonial discourses should be pushed, or what would be gained by such an exercise. Ahmad’s critique depends too much on the fact that most of the people he criticizes live or work in academic institutions in the West. (However, Partha Chatterjee, whose intellectual positions Ahmad disagrees with, lives in Calcutta, one of the poorest cities of the world. And Ahmad does not discuss Gayatri Spivak at all—could it be that mix of feminism, Marxism, postcolonialism and deconstruction is too

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hot for him to handle?)

These polemics are ultimately silly. I only make them to stress the point that a critique such as Ahmad's rather easily falls victim to its own design. Political economic facts are important. The question is: Do Marxist historians, particularly in the Third World, have anything to learn from what Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari, and others have taught us? Or should we treat their writings as a reactionary corpus that reduces us to cultural relativism and political passivity?

There is something to be learned from this contemporary run of social and literary theory. Marx's thoughts were an internal critique of the Enlightenment. Beyond his trenchant internal critique of the category "capital," he offered ideas about "history," "individual," "freedom" and "progress" that he shared with his theoretical predecessors. Most if not all of these categories have only partial application to histories outside of that of the modern middle classes in the West (and I am not sure about the extent of their applicability there). With most of these categories, scholars such as myself have a strange relationship: while we can produce "critiques" of our societies with their help, we are positioned by them both as "native informants" and as investigators. This produces two worlds of performance, one "analytical" and the other "lived." They are both of value, but a socialist critique gives no clue to thinking about their relationship because it is so closely identified with only one side of the equation.

Take the question of "rights." This idea has been of indisputable value in Indian history. Without it we would not have obtained political independence in a nation-state form, nor the oppressed in India their present places in public life. Yet rights never speak to the entirety of my (or other Indians') historical predicament. I know that I can critique my family and society in terms of rights, and that the critique has certain undoubted uses. At the same time, I would feel terribly deprived of many pleasurable emotions if the entire gamut of my kin con-

nections had to be negotiated in the language of rights. There are other ideas and categories which can also be used to produce critiques and resistances, but they are outside of socialist thought. Oftentimes they are even outside of the very idea of the political that the European notion of democracy has given us. Of course, one has to allow for a degree of translatability between systems of thought, and there are indeed times when one can argue with some reason for "universals" that run across human societies—the desire for social justice, for instance—but not always.

Besides, these "native" categories often have contradictory functions. Take the Hindu idea of *bhakti* (devotion). History shows that the idea was often used to develop harsh, violent, oppressive hierarchies, as between landlords and peasants. But *bhakti*, particularly the idea of willfully submerging/submitting oneself in/to a larger entity, is also central to many of my "Hindu" aesthetic and emotional practices (and thus to a "practical" understanding of personhood). To let all of that go as "reactionary" would be to lose emotional access to much of the music and poetry I love, as someone from the subcontinent. Marxism gives me no handle on this problem. The same could be said of many other analytical categories derived from the lega-

cy of the European Enlightenment.

Therefore, while one cannot, as a political animal, afford to live outside of the categories of thought that have helped structure the global and its critique, one also needs an Archimedean point outside of these critiques so as to be able to retain some sense of the many ways of being human that cultural difference is all about. It is not possible for any one political philosophy to grasp within its unitary hold this enormous variety.

This is not an argument for unbridled cultural relativism. As the world becomes increasingly globalized, political economic critiques become more urgent than ever, giving us a perspective over the dominations that underwrite that process. Marx(ism) is indispensable in this enterprise. At the same time, another critical task emerges. "Difference" (which should neither be essentialized nor subsumed in the idea of "diversity") has to be written, acted and lived out in this globalized world so that we can sustain a plurality of life forms within the apparent homogeneity of consumerism. Here I learn more from a Derrida, Heidegger, Levinas or a de Certeau than I do from philosophies that work within a Hegelian tradition. For me, being a postcolonial historian of India means learning to live with the split. ■

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