

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Totality, Revisited

CRYSTAL BARTOLOVICH

Many of my fellow contributors are writing—importantly—about the context and impact of the conference that gave rise to the edited volume *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. I am focusing instead on the ongoing implications for intellectuals of the volume itself. Reading edited collections from earlier moments can feel rather like opening a time capsule. Some items are still familiar, some strange, and many both at once. When *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* was first published in 1988, “theory,” the humanities, and universities were situated differently in the world (albeit by no means homogeneously!), or, to announce my main point straightaway, in capitalism. Though poststructuralism and the New Social Movements were challenging Marxist “totality” in the 1980s, there was not yet a “New Materialism” (at least not under that banner) nor were state legislatures and organized right-wing groups attacking the university in general and the humanities in particular with the vigor and success they are now in the United States (though stirrings, especially in state defunding efforts as well as in the long-term planning of the Koch Foundation were underway and right-wing assaults on universities outside the United States were legion). I address here the ways the debate about “totality” that permeates *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* is very much still relevant, but also inflected differently given changed historical conditions and the emergence of new perspectives.

Although—or rather because—Fredric Jameson views “totality” (the “unified logic of . . . [a] social system” [“Cognitive Mapping” 348]) as under assault both in general and at the conference (as attested by the lively exchange during the transcribed Q and A), his essay makes three key points about the importance of the concept: totality, because “inaccessible to any individual subject” (350), can be approached only

CRYSTAL BARTOLOVICH is associate professor of English at Syracuse University. She has published widely on topics in Marxism, decolonial studies, and early modern studies, and her current project is “Hating *Utopia* Properly.”

collectively in organized struggle (351–52); this struggle must be directed toward “transforming a whole social system” (global capitalism) (355); and encouraging participation in this struggle requires dedicated ideological production—a pedagogical and inspirational Marxist “vision of the future that grips the masses” (355), which it is the task of cognitive mapping as an “aesthetic” to produce (353). Jameson comes to these points by extending the geographer Kevin Lynch’s *Image of the City* by way of Louis Althusser’s understanding of ideology as “absent cause,” a macro scale inaccessible to individuals (350). For Lynch, urban mental mapping is individual, local, and immediate—it is, in other words, micro in scale, a point to which I return below. Some cities are easier to navigate than others, Lynch observes, and he wants to give urban planners some pointers about how to improve the individual experience of getting around without getting lost (back in the days before smartphones with mapping apps). Jameson counters, though, that the “local” is never only local under conditions of global capitalism, in which “the truth of . . . experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place” (349). Its “truth” can be approached only dialectically and collectively as a totality.

Straightaway, then, one must lay to rest one of the most misleading claims made about totality by its critics: that it is “seamless” (DeLanda 10) or “a homogeneity” (Tsing 65). Not only is capitalism necessarily unequal, both globally and locally, and shot through with contradictions, it is a “unity” of differences not fully assimilated to the dominant relations. Stuart Hall thus repeatedly describes it as a “structure in dominance,” not a homogeneity. The Congo-mined coltan in a Manhattan cell phone, or European e-waste being sorted by children in the Global South—to take only two concrete examples—means that there is no way to understand subject positions anywhere only locally, as if they operated independently of global capitalism, but also that structure and experience are not homogeneous. Emphasizing the contradictions between immediate “lived experience and structure,” and the host of uneven relations (on multiple scales) that they give rise to, Jameson argues that “the

incapacity to map [capitalist totality] socially is as crippling to political experience as the analogous incapacity to map spatially” (“Cognitive Mapping” 353). And, crucially, this was not always the case, because capitalism did not always exist.

Jameson also briefly traces the long history that gave rise to the rupture between experience and “truth” because understanding this history matters to political praxis (348–49). Moving beyond capitalism requires undoing its destructive relations in their totality and replacing them with liberatory relations. Thus, to follow the spatial metaphor (though Jameson, rightly, cautions against taking it too literally), determining the best route forward politically requires a constant recognition of capitalism as a distinctive and unified global social formation but not a static or homogeneous one. Its ever-changing history must be constantly remapped, dialectically—that is, in ways that take into account, on the one hand, the contradictions generated by the ongoing global expansion of capitalism, and, on the other, the ever more intensive saturation of these contradictions into everyday life, which results not in homogeneity but in variable experiences and perspectives of persons situated differently in totality (see, e.g., Toscano; Day).

An example of this dialectic of struggle at work can be seen in a frank account of the development of the Combahee River Collective in the 1970s. Its influential “statement” describes the “disillusionment” of Black women with the “liberation movements” of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, experiences that brought the collective together to “develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men” (Combahee River Collective 17). However, although the failure of leftist organizations at the time to attend sufficiently to their concerns provoked dissatisfaction, the collective discovered that they could not abandon the struggles of other movements completely: “A combined anti-racist and anti-sexist position drew us together initially, and as we developed politically we addressed ourselves to heterosexism and economic oppression under capitalism” (18). In other words, the particular

capitalist conditions in which they found themselves forced them—repeatedly—to reevaluate their movement, and they came to recognize that “the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy” (19). They also came to recognize that each struggle for social justice on its own had limits as well as strengths, which means that each must engage with all the others without suppressing their particular concerns. Thus, while they are in “essential agreement with Marx’s theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed,” they insist “that his analysis must be *extended further* in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women” (20; emphasis mine). Their changing views are an example of cognitive mapping at work. Dialectic, as the dynamic collective movement of history, a living praxis responsive to ever-changing actually existing conditions, cannot proceed in a liberatory direction unless different struggles for social justice engage with—and work out a path forward together by challenging—one another. The project of openness is crucial, but so, I would suggest, is the terrain on which all the oppressions meet unequally, which Jameson, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak too, call “capitalism.” At the same time, though, Spivak implicitly “extends further” Jameson’s cognitive mapping already in her essay in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*—as do others. This is not a weakness of Jameson’s work per se, but precisely what his dialectical emphasis on totality imagines would be required: a collective project.

Spivak’s critique of the limits of celebrated intellectuals—explicitly Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault—in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” effectively reorients Jameson’s mapping project by attending to the specificities of the Global South in relation to the Global North. As she points out, Deleuze and Foucault could be painfully obtuse about these specificities, with material and theoretical repercussions, all the more striking given their status as “prophets of heterogeneity” (272). She points in particular to Deleuze’s invoking “the workers struggle” without attending to the “international division of labor”

(275). This is not a “gotcha” accusation to which an ever-expanding listing of oppressions can open any theorist; Spivak has already called the “pious” listing of oppressions into question (297). Its real purpose is, much more importantly, to doubt the exuberant assumption of major theorists that “the oppressed” can successfully articulate resistance from wherever they are situated, that “any desire destructive of any power” will do, and that all these interventions will, somehow, meet up with “the workers’ struggle” (272). Such assumptions—and the theoretical and political practices resulting from them—she suggests, tend to reinforce colonial relations instead of undoing them. There is no plane of equivalence in which such resistances might take place in a totality structured unevenly by the “international division of labor”—as well as by patriarchy and numerous other relations of inequality (272). Like Jameson, then, she argues not only for intellectuals to expand their vision beyond the local but also for the importance of long historical views of the emergence of capitalism and colonialism; indeed, she is the only contributor to the volume who offers an extended consideration of material from before the twentieth century. My main point here is that neither Jameson nor Spivak sees any way to elude consideration of capitalist totality or critical-political projects to counter it as such.

Since the 1980s, the rise of New Materialisms, however, has posed new challenges for the Marxist project with ever more strident rejection of totality and ever more fervent embrace of the “micro.” Take Heather Love’s reading of Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*, in which Love (rightly) points out Rankine’s emphasis on “microaggressions” but also suggests that this focus allies the book “with the micro-sociological approach of [Irving] Goffman and [Robert] Emerson,” whose distinction from Jameson she lays out clearly: “there is no leap to totality or collectivity at any point” (434), a move she praises as “political realism” (421). *Citizen*, though, belies Love’s characterization of it.¹ Take “Making Room,” in which there is—emphatically—a “leap to totality” and “collectivity” as it situates readers (a heterogeneous group addressed directly in the second person throughout) in a subway car on its way to “Union

Station,” which has just been entered by a “you” who discovers a woman standing, even though there is an empty seat next to a “man” (otherwise unmarked in terms of identity). “You” takes the “space next to the man [which] is the pause in a conversation you are suddenly rushing to fill.” Elaborating on this “conversation,” the poem later shifts, pointedly, to a totalizing scale: “You sit next to the man on the train, bus, in the plane, waiting room, anywhere he could be forsaken. You put your body there in proximity to, adjacent to, alongside, within” (131). Emphasizing this shift in scale further, in a later line, Rankine says that it occurs because the “space follows” the man, indicating that the subway car has been situated in a far more expansive cartography all along (132). This “space” is a gesture toward systematicity and totality without which racism and sexism, as well as capitalism, lose their structural meaning. As Alexander G. Weheliye has put it, “totality” remains a necessary concept in order to bring a critical lens to bear on “the foundation upon which . . . particularities are put and kept in place” in the face of overemphasis today on deterritorialization when territorialization is still powerful (35). A (dialectical) emphasis on the latter requires cognitive mapping, and the very total and collective conceptualization specifically rejected by Love.

Love’s reading makes Rankine’s subway car appear to be like Bruno Latour’s in *Aramis*, an exposition and illustration of a “relativist sociology” in which a (fictional) professor eschews critical distance and an assumed superior vantage point to that of informants and stays emphatically “micro.” The professor explains to his doubtful graduate student that to produce their case study—on an abandoned mass transit project—they need do nothing but conduct interviews and “write everything down” (164). The student protests, “But is it [what interviewees tell them] true? Did it happen that way?” The professor responds: “We don’t know a thing about it, and that’s not the issue. All we do is write down the stories people tell us” (164). When the student remains skeptical, the professor avers that their job is not to “unearth the truth in the actors’ stead. The truth will come out of the novel, out of all the novels told by all the interviewees about all the others . . .”

(165). One never judges, since to do so is an affront to the equality of “actants”; the professor informs the student “no one has behaved badly. No one would have known how to behave better. You wouldn’t have known how to do any better” (198–99). This denunciation of “critical” knowledge in the face of a putatively “democratic” equality is a persistent theme in Latour. As one of his more rigorous sympathetic readers puts it, “Latour’s commitment to democracy is . . . an intimate part of his metaphysical position. The universe is *nothing but* countless actors, who gain in reality through complex negotiations and associations with one another. . . . We cannot appeal to some authority (geometry, power) lying outside the shifting alliances of networks” (Harman 88–89). For Latour there is no “totality,” no forces greater than the immediate interactions among individual parts in “shifting alliances.” He can thus affirm the politics of politicians or bureaucrats and give ball bearings a voice, since all are equally actors, albeit not equally successful ones. Lack of success, however, it should be noted, his theory cannot explain; it is precisely what Jameson, Spivak, and Rankine, however, focus on: uneven positioning in totality. Latour’s approach thus raises many questions, not least concerning how to account for “asymmetries of power,” a point on which Latour and his followers sometimes candidly admit weakness (Latour et al. 612). Spivak, Jameson, and Rankine beg to differ, and their counterviews remain salient despite the turn to Latour-inflected New Materialisms, specifically those directed against Marxist materialism. Latour’s collective and the collective to which Marxists refer, the latter being unevenly structured—as well as dynamic and heterogeneous—are not the same.

What if—unlike Latour—one evaluates the cost of indifference to asymmetry? In *Aramis* the professor accuses the student of wanting a person to blame for the failure of the transit system to be built, and schools him in “democratic” respect: “*you* wouldn’t have known how to do any better” (198; emphasis mine). But this rebuke carries with it a number of troubling assumptions. After all, anyone could easily agree with Latour’s fictional professor that any given individual, as an individual, would not necessarily “do better” than another without

concluding that this means that there are only contingent “shifting alliances among networks” at play. But what of collectives and totality? That is a different matter altogether. For Latour there is no “capitalism” or “society” that could generate the structural constraints that Jameson, Spivak, and Rankine point to. He thus denounces recourse to structural explanation as a conspiracy theory.² Latour tells many “stories” in *Aramis*, but none of them interrogates systemic problems such as (to take just a few) the gender politics of technoculture, the corruption of politics and science by capitalism, the conditions of labor in which the transit project would have been built, or the ecological impact that building it might have had on the planet and its inhabitants, locally or globally (how many rare earth metals would be required, and so on). Though network theorists claim to be more attentive to details, more lavishly appreciative of the “translations” that occur at each “node” in the network, they are incapable, by definition, of attending to the structural impingements on every node unevenly imposed by capitalism, to which Jameson and Spivak point.

Jane Bennett’s account of “responsibility” underscores the problem of taking Latour seriously on this point. At the end of her explanation of “distributed agency” in a power outage, Bennett contends that “a theory of vibrant matter presents individuals as simply incapable of bearing full responsibility” (37). However, “responsibility” doesn’t lie with individuals but with the structure of capitalism as a whole, which many New Materialists, Bennett included, make impossible to address. In her eagerness to foreground “thing power,” human structures like capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and the like go by the wayside. This is a problem in itself, but so is her assumption about the effect of the practice she advocates. Like Latour, she wants the “grid” to speak by way of a cataloging of its actant parts, an activity meant to encourage respect for “things,” which will lead—she asserts—to heightened ecological consciousness. By the testimony of her own book, however, it seems far more likely to discourage politically meaningful ecological practice, collective or individual. What

happened, for example, to the “plastic work glove” and the “plastic bottle cap” she recounts encountering with awe on a Baltimore street (4)? She does not say. Surely, any human concerned with planetary destruction needs to remove those items from the gutter before they end up in the great Pacific garbage patch, the water supply, the bodies of water-dependent flora and fauna, as well as soil and air, and to work collectively toward far fewer of them being produced at all. Not only does Bennett appear to have left them in the gutter, presumably so that other humans could become transfixed by them before they are washed into the Chesapeake, but, far more important, her larger premise is faulty. She does not explain how loving one bottle cap, describing it reverently, will lead to fewer being produced, except in a hopeful surmise that loving individual things will lead to a decrease in consumerism. Isn’t it pretty to think so. That “love” does nothing to provoke even Bennett to collect ecodamaging plastic from the street for recycling, or to keep plastic from the gutters in the first place by transforming the structure of capitalism that produces ever more stuff of necessity (if not bottle caps, something else)—a system in which humans and nonhumans are collectively, albeit unevenly, implicated. Totality is the level at which change must occur.

That does not mean that totality is either static or homogeneous, or that “Marxism” holds the key to all mythologies in an unchanging form. The editors of an important recent collection, *Colonial Racial Capitalism*, insist—like the Combahee Collective before them—that Marxism requires being “extended further,” but not by intellectuals restricting themselves to “micro” description. They point out that their project

recenters Indigenous and settler colonial critique within what is often taken for granted within Marxist analyses: who labors and is made to labor (and who is presumed not to) in the presence and function of land in all its settler dispropriative and counter-resistance registers as relation, as kin, as prior possession, as property, and as the constitutive and literal theft of ground upon which colonial and racial relations are enacted, policed, surveilled, speculated, and monetized. (Koshy et al. 13)

Adding “colonial” to Cedric J. Robinson’s challenge in *Black Marxism* to think capitalism as “racial,” and foregrounding the struggles of Indigenous peoples without dismissing or subordinating race, the volume emphasizes that “capitalism” remains a shared site of struggle, albeit by no means homogeneously or equally. In my view, the challenge of Indigenous theory in Marxism is one of the most exciting sites of theoretical production today precisely because it “extends” Marxism into the terrain of serious attention to the nonhuman while retaining a recognition of “colonial racial capitalism.” As Myka Tucker-Abramson has put it, “indigenous theory insists on something like totality in its focus on interconnection and systematicity, one that often returns to questions of capitalism and colonialism.” To put this another way, the challenge of the New Materialism is important, but its rejection of totality has taken it in politically infelicitous directions that Indigenous theory and praxis redress.

The contrast is clear: Love praises staying at the “micro” level as “political realism.” In a previous contribution to a *PMLA* forum such as this one, I argued that at a moment when the university and the humanities are under relentless (and increasingly successful conservative) attack, this supposed “humility” is a recipe for oblivion. To be sure, having outsize expectations for the political impact of one’s own writing or pedagogy is foolish—but not because the “micro” is politically sufficient; rather it is foolish because one’s own writing is individual, a position that, as any dialectical thinker can tell you, is guaranteed to be insufficient. Jameson and Spivak both underscore this point. Now, more than ever, there is a need for a collective response to assaults on the university—in Beijing, Gaza, or Manhattan—that are entirely congruent with the demands of capitalism, as a totality, which is destroying the planet and everything on it. But as Love tellingly puts it, the theorists she admires eschew not only totality but also the collective. Dialectical thinkers, conversely, necessarily emphasize both locality and totality, individual and collective, and indeed can and have strategically put the emphasis on one or the other, as the “contradictory, antagonistic reality” we all inhabit demands (see Buck-Morss on

Adorno [58–59]). Individual scholars have to learn when (and that) “their privilege is their loss,” as Spivak explains (287), which requires “systematic unlearning” (295; emphasis mine). Nothing is more likely to lead one politically astray from this point of view than assuming—especially in the Global North—that any individual intellectual is likely to understand the many particular situations of the Global South in “local” terms, or that any actor can equally speak and be heard from wherever they are. No local or “micro” view can ever be “true” to the uneven capitalist conditions of existence. In this context, the localizing, micro “political realism” that Love praises is exactly what Mark Fisher laments as “capitalist realism”: the debilitating assumption that capitalism cannot be superseded in its totality, so why bother? Capitalist reproduction, Fisher warns, gains power and momentum from this capitulation. Marxism—open-endedly responsive to new challenges because critically collective, locally and systemically—begs to differ. Still.

NOTES

1. Rankine explicitly describes racism as “systemic” (qtd. in Kellaway) and by no means politically addressable at the “micro” level, though it is describable there in its symptoms.

2. Latour associates “critique” with “conspiracy” in his essay “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”; see Jameson, *Geopolitical Aesthetic* 9–84 for an alternative view.

WORKS CITED

- Bartolovich, Crystal. “Humanities of Scale.” *PMLA*, vol. 127, no. 1, Jan. 2012, pp. 115–21.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke UP, 2010.
- Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*. Free Press, 1977.
- Combahee River Collective. “The Combahee River Collective Statement.” *How We Get Free*, edited by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. Haymarket Books, 2017, pp. 15–27.
- Day, Iyko. *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism*. Duke UP, 2016.
- DeLanda, Manuel. *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2006.
- Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books, 2009.

- Hall, Stuart. "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance." *Stuart Hall: Essential Essays*, edited by David Morley, vol. 1, Duke UP, 2019, pp. 172–221.
- Harman, Graham. *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*. re.press, 2009.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Cognitive Mapping." *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988, pp. 347–57.
- . *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*. Indiana UP, 1994.
- Kellaway, Kate. "Claudia Rankine: 'Blackness in the White Imagination Has Nothing to Do with Black People.'" *The Guardian*, 27 Dec. 2015, www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/27/claudia-rankine-poet-citizen-american-lyric-feature.
- Koshy, Susan, et al. Introduction. *Colonial Racial Capitalism*, edited by Koshy et al., Duke UP, 2022, pp. 1–30.
- Latour, Bruno. *Aramis*. Translated by Catherine Porter, Harvard UP, 1996.
- . "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 30, 2004, pp. 225–48.
- Latour, Bruno, et al. "The Whole Is Always Smaller Than Its Parts." *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 63, no. 4, 2012, pp. 590–615.
- Love, Heather. "Small Change: Realism, Immanence and the Politics of the Micro." *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 77, no. 3, 2016, pp. 419–45.
- Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Graywolf Press, 2014.
- Robinson, Cedric J. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. 3rd ed., U of North Carolina P, 2021.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988, pp. 271–313.
- Toscano, Alberto. "Seeing It Whole: Staging Totality in Social Theory and Art." *Sociological Review*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2012, pp. 64–83.
- Tsing, Anna. *Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton UP, 2015.
- Tucker-Abramson, Myka. "Make Literary Criticism Great Again." *B2O: Boundary 2 Online*, Sept. 2018, www.boundary2.org/2018/09/myka-tucker-abramson-make-literary-criticism-great-again-review-of-david-alworths-site-reading-fiction-art-social-form/.
- Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Duke UP, 2014.