

Response to Deb Kelsh

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(Editor's Note: The following is a reply to Deb Kelsh's article, "Desire and Class," which appeared in the Spring 1998 issue of *Cultural Logic*)

How sad a comment on the left today that some like Kelsh can derive satisfaction from writing such absurdly sectarian diatribes. With the certainty and bombast often produced to repackage these tired old formulas, her writing proceeds as if both Marxist and non-Marxist theoretical work had not provided profound critiques of those formulas -- critiques that, for the Marxists involved, were understood as the necessary basis for renewing and rebuilding the Marxian theoretical and political traditions.

I will leave to the many others -- likewise blithely, grotesquely, and probably equally inaccurately savaged in this article -- the decision as to whether it is worth responding. Having read this article, I would like to be brief in response (and my brevity is itself part of the substantive critical response).

My book with Stephen Resnick, *Knowledge and Class*, says over and over again, and in these exact words, that our interpretation of Marx understands his concept of class as located within that part of a social totality designated by the word "economic." This is not surprising, given what Marx wrote about, given that Resnick and I are professors of economics, given that our publisher, the University of Chicago Press, consistently promoted the book as part of its economic list, and given the entire thrust of that book, which returned again and again to the realm of the economy as the site of class processes. Kelsh, however, attributes to us the view that class is rather an aspect of culture or a cultural concept. She offers no textual support (there is none), nor the slightest recognition that such an attribution by her might spare a sentence to argue why our claim and argument about class as an economic concept ought to be questioned or rejected. Perhaps the absurdity of her dispensing with our argument flows from her piece's evident need to sweep all manner of folks into the satisfying grind of her critical mastication.

In Kelsh's paragraphs devoted to dispatching our bad deeds from good Marxism, she repeatedly attributes to us the view that "one must not prioritize any struggle." Now, the least offensive absurdity of this wild claim is that it directly contradicts what we say in virtually all our work, namely that overdetermination is different from the sorts of undecidability claims that some (hardly all) kinds of postmodernism affirm. In *Knowledge and Class* we specifically show how the concept of "entry point" (to which we give great attention) linked to overdetermination entails a precise prioritization in theory and in practical life, but we explain carefully that the prioritization need not and cannot sustain a claim to some epistemological absolute such as "the truth." We devote an entire chapter (chapter 2) to showing how a pantheon of major Marxist thinkers

(including Lenin, Lukacs, Gramsci, and Althusser among others) worked toward this same perspective as central to Marxism.

More offensive in Kelsh's attribution to us of the refusal to prioritize any struggle is what it suggests about her grasp of the whole book. *Knowledge and Class*, in its entirety, prioritizes class as its organizing concept and focus; moreover it does so explicitly on the grounds of wanting thereby to revive and focus Marxist thought and work upon making class a key component of revolutionary goals and strategies. Indeed, by our critical examination of the multiple, different concepts of class that have swirled around within Marxism, we sought to explain and justify just why we believe that becoming self-conscious about that multiplicity and taking "partisan positions" (our phrase) for some and against others are important steps now for Marxists to take. *Knowledge and Class* does argue that this prioritization can and should be undertaken without the absolutist claim that class (in our or anybody else's definition) is the basis of social life and history. In other words, we argue for prioritization but against epistemological essentialism (which is what overdetermination means and how we defined it explicitly more than once in the book). All of this seems to have escaped Kelsh's reading; she simply reduces all the argument to a simplemindedness against which she rallies her critical faculties. But the most offensive absurdity of her claim that we refuse to prioritize is that-- as we show in the book -- it is not possible to do that -- neither for Marxists nor for anyone else. We can't do everything in theory or in politics or in any aspect of life; no one can. We all prioritize all the time. The question we addressed -- and that Kelsh does not grasp -- is how to understand such constant prioritization and how to explain the particular prioritizations proper to Marxism. We argue why Marxist prioritizations should proceed on the basis of a break with the epistemological past that Marxists so long and so uncritically shared with non- and anti-Marxists. We argue why we think Marx initiated such a break and why subsequent Marxists rarely held on to and built from that break (the exceptions being just those Marxists discussed in chapter 2). We conclude that a return to Marx's break and rebuilding from it is what Althusser especially began and what we have thought important to carry several steps further.

Enough. Kelsh is plainly uninterested in our arguments other than as raw materials to transform into suitable targets for her target practice. Too bad. She attacks the transformations she herself has made in the name of some authentic Marxism that goes back exactly to many of the formulations which we see as having held Marxism back from what might have been accomplished in the twentieth century. Too bad. But backwards is not where Marxism needs to go.

Let me conclude with a response to the reiterated ad hominem suggesting that we are not engaged in "organizing". On the one hand, Kelsh writes as though the terms she uses -- not just "organizing" but also phrases like "reliable knowledge of the objectively produced world" -- are straight-forward and unambiguous. But of course, they are not. Marxists and non-Marxists have used and debated starkly different definitions and applications of these terms. She proceeds as if this was not the case. That is not serious analytical or political work. My own personal activities have found Marxism practically useful in political work (I have worked with trade unions, run independently for political

office in an urban setting, and helped to organize Marxist journals, conferences, and so on, alongside my teaching). But that practicality -- that "organizing" -- is inextricably entwined with that rethinking of Marxism (and of important theoretical breakthroughs achieved outside of Marxism) to which Marx invited and reinvented his readers. After all, he rethought his own formulations across his life while paying close and respectful attention to those with whom he disagreed (often profoundly) but from whom he acknowledged all that he had learned. Resnick and I have likewise learned from the "postals" that Kelsh delights in denouncing. We have rejected some parts of poststructuralism and postmodernism and critically appropriated other parts within our Marxist project. We have thereby engaged in a struggle -- one of several that we have prioritized in our work -- over how and where these large intellectual movements of our time will go in terms of their political implications. That struggle, which is far from over, is not advanced, deepened, or won by crude and uninformed wholesale denunciations of what are deeply contradictory movements.