

What Really Matters?: the elusive quality of the material in feminist thought

Abstract

The concept of the material was the focus of much feminist work in the 1970s. It has always been a deeply contested one, even for feminists working within a broadly materialist paradigm of the social. Materialist feminists stretched the concept of the material beyond the narrowly economic in their attempts to develop a social ontology of gender and sexuality. Nonetheless, the quality of the social asserted by an expanded sense of the material - its 'materiality' - remains ambiguous. New terminologies of materiality and materialisation have been developed within post-structuralist feminist thought and the literature on embodiment. The quality of 'materiality' is no longer asserted - as in materialist feminisms - but is problematised through an implicit deferral of ontology in these more contemporary usages, forcing us to interrogate the limits of both materialist and post-structuralist forms of constructionism. What really matters is how these newer terminologies of 'materiality' and 'materialisation' induce us to develop a fuller social ontology of gender and sexuality; one that weaves together social, cultural, experiential and embodied practices.

keywords: material, materiality, materialisation, the social, ontology, gender, sexuality, effectivity.

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Introduction

In this paper we explore some of the ways in which the concept of the material has inflected feminist thought, and consider this term in relation to the newer terms of materiality and materialisation. Its debut performance in feminist thought was in the 1970s within a current of feminism that was both social constructionist (in the sense of relentlessly sociological) and materialist (although the sense of this is not quite as clear). It is useful to describe this current of feminist thought as working within a broadly materialist paradigm of the social where the terms material, materialist, and materialism cluster together to signify a set of epistemological, theoretical and methodological commitments to the constitution of the social: ones that derive more or less loosely from Marxist historical materialism. This current of feminism was politically as well as academically engaged, developing its theoretical frameworks both through engagement in specific political campaigns (for example, wages for housework and equal pay for women) and through dialogue and debate with a range of liberationist and new left movements.

Feminists working within this broadly materialist, social constructionist paradigm were concerned to, first, displace prevailing naturalist, essentialist paradigms of gender and sexuality and, second, replace them with explanations of gender/sexuality which demonstrated the social and structural bases of gendered inequalities. However, whilst a broadly materialist paradigm contained a specific set of epistemological and methodological commitments in its elaboration of theoretical frameworks, it was also anchored in political commitments, the first stage of which was to displace naturalist explanations of gender/sexual inequalities. As Stevi Jackson makes clear, politicizing sexuality required a rejection of essentialism:

In making sexuality a political issue, feminists began to conceptualise it as changeable and hence challenged the prevailing assumption that sexual desires and practices were fixed by nature. Viewing sexuality as socially constructed thus followed directly from politicising it (Jackson, 1999: 6).

The development and elaboration of academic analyses therefore had an overriding political aim: to allow the interrogation of these formations as fundamentally social precisely because dominant essentialist accounts legitimised gender/sexual inequalities as ‘natural’ and thus inevitable and immutable. The point we want to

draw out and pursue in this paper is that this key aim of politicisation can be understood as a focus on *ontology*. Displacing essentialist explanations is precisely aimed at rejecting naturalised accounts of how and why we exist as gendered and sexualised beings. Therefore, our re-tracing of the concept of

the material begins with an exploration of how the materialist feminist project has used this concept as a way of mapping out the beginnings of a *social ontology* of gender and sexuality.

These attempts to develop a social ontology also stretched the concept of the material in order to capture those symbolic, experiential and processual aspects of the social which were traditionally under-theorised in historical materialism. We suggest, however, that there is a lack of clarity and consistency in contemporary materialist feminist thought when the concept of the material is invoked to describe practices and discourses *other* than structural and/or economic. Furthermore, we explore whether the lack of rigorous conceptualisation indicates a reluctance to confront the limits of a materialist constructionist framework in evoking those aspects of the gendered social which they are trying to apprehend.

The key aim of eschewing essentialism continues in the current focus on embodiment in feminist thought on gender and sexuality. Materialisation and materiality are the key concepts in these newer literatures. Here we argue that the significance of these newer terminologies of materiality and materialisation lies in the way in which these move us onto a radically uncertain terrain with respect to the ontological status of gender and sexuality. This is, of course, the terrain of post-structuralism, which challenges the hierarchy of value in materialism by asserting the ability of discursive practices to form the objects of which they speak and, as such, represents a critique of materialism (Barrett, 1992, 1999). There is an apparent antinomy between the concept of the material and the newer terminologies of materiality and materialisation, one which mirrors and/or echoes current antinomies within feminist social theory, such as those between the material and the cultural (Adkins and Lury, 1996; Butler, 1998; Fraser, 1998), materialism and idealism (Butler, 1993; Fraser 1998), structuralism and post-structuralism (Jackson, 1999; Walby, 1994), structure and lived experience (Rahman, 2000), historicisation and deconstruction (Adkins, 2002a, 2002b forthcoming). However, the common thread weaving through more traditional and contemporary feminist modes of theorizing gender and sexuality is the rejection of essentialism through the displacement of naturalist ontology with a social ontology of gender and sexuality.

Although we are aware that each has her own understanding and definition of the terms material, materiality and materialisation, depending on her theoretical location, our re-tracing of the ways in which we think these terms have been deployed is geared towards furthering the feminist project of securing the grounds for a social ontology of gender and sexuality. Hence, we focus on the trajectory of the concept of the material specifically insofar as it has underscored the development of a broadly materialist feminist understanding of gender and sexuality (see also Jackson, 2000, 2001). We argue that the terms materiality and materialisation should induce this tradition to develop a more robust social ontology of gender and sexuality which remains astute to structural context but also embraces lived experience and 'the sociality of matter' (Clough 2000). After all, what really matters is how we conceptualise the social in such a way as to induce an adequate account of its workings in relation to the construction of gender and sexuality. In conclusion, we suggest that for materialist feminism to realize the full potential of its fundamentally social constructionist project, there needs to be a recognition of both the limits of a constructionism grounded in materialism and the potential of a constructionism that deploys materiality as a more porous and flexible concept.

The broadly materialist paradigm and its recent recuperation

The broadly materialist paradigm, which invoked concepts of 'the material', 'materialist' and 'materialism' as the cornerstone of its social ontology of gender and sexuality, made its debut in feminist thought in the 1970s, after which it got few curtain calls and found itself largely eclipsed by post-structuralist and post-modernist forms of feminist theory that owed more to philosophy, psychoanalysis and literary theory than to sociology and cognate disciplines in the social sciences. Looking back at the often tortuous and obfuscatory debates that marked the emergence of this broadly materialist paradigm in feminist thought, we are struck by how recent recuperations of the concept of the material in feminism are highly selective (see for example Butler 1998).

To facilitate a more representative (albeit necessarily partial and sketchy) appreciation of the various ways in which feminists have worked within a broadly materialist paradigm, we offer a broad-brush distinction between feminist materialism and materialist feminism. *Feminist materialism* - dubbed 'feminist historical materialism' by Pollert (1996) and often termed 'Marxist-Feminism' (Barrett, 1990) - worked in various ways within the parameters of Marxist historical materialism as both a method and a theory of political economy. *Materialist feminism* (Delphy,

1984b; Jackson, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2001) or 'historical materialist feminism' (Cockburn, 1981)) worked with a Marxist materialist method but not necessarily a theory of political economy. The broadly materialist paradigm, then, catches a number of strands of feminist thought that worked with a concept of the material but at varying degrees of distance from the dominant materialist paradigm of Marxism.

Even within this broadly materialist paradigm, the concept of the material was a deeply contested one, which, paradoxically, symbolised shared agendas at the same time as generating deep divisions, as materialist feminism emerged out of a fraught and critical engagement with Marxism. We should note, though, that the recent recuperation of the term 'materialist feminism' in the USA (Hennessy, 1993, 2000; Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997), whilst recognizing the necessarily critical engagement with historical materialism that characterised feminist work falling within this broadly materialist paradigm, nonetheless tends to collapse the currents of feminist materialism and materialist feminism into one another.

Feminist materialists or Marxist-feminists located their analysis of women's oppression within a Marxist historical materialist framework (i.e. a 'social reproduction' problematic – see Marshall, 1994, for a critical review) whilst still according causal priority to the logic of capitalist production. Barrett (1990: x) usefully unpicks the central propositions of Marxist feminism, clarifying the strictly limited use of the concept of the material within Marxist-feminism. First, women's oppression is historically embedded in the social relations of capitalism and 'thus material in character' and second, the role of ideology in this historical process should not be underestimated. Indeed, as Barrett (1990) observes in retrospect:

Women's Oppression Today can be seen, from a staunchly materialist position, as an 'ideologistic' text in the sense that, as Johanna Brenner and Maria Ramas have put it, 'gender ideology is Barrett's deus ex machina...!' (Barrett, 1990: xvi).

Yet, in our view, the key to Barrett's project, and the ground it shares with other broadly materialist projects of the period, is that, as she herself says ten years after writing it:

The book is firmly locked in the 'social constructionist' mode of its time and is remorselessly sociological in its treatment of 'sex and gender'. If you look for biology in the index you will find only 'biologism', and this is a symptomatic

transposition. One passage is eloquent in its insistence that biological difference is an insignificant basis for the social meaning of gender: "The pattern of gender relations in our society is overwhelmingly a social rather than a natural one ... (p.76)" (Barrett, 1990: xviv).

What this signals (and goes on to problematise) is the central concern of remorselessly sociological constructionist feminists with producing social explanations of the specificity of women's social position, as distinct from reading this off from or reducing it to biology. The concept of gender symbolised a shared social constructionist project that sought to move beyond what were perceived as the prevailing biologically reductionist explanations of the time.

The broadly materialist paradigm, which framed much British, French and North American feminism – and feminist sociology in particular - was a loose current. But two key texts from both sides of the Atlantic were influential in inducing a more critical engagement with Marxist materialism by a current best-termed 'materialist feminist' (Delphy, 1984b). These were Christine Delphy's (1984) *The Main Enemy* and Heidi Hartmann's (1981) *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*. What these texts shared in common was a desire to untie materialist feminist analyses from the coattails of Marxism. Delphy quite audaciously (for the time) mobilised Marxist methodology and terminology to argue that 'patriarchy' was a 'mode of production' that centred on household production, the axis around which women as wives and men as husbands formed as classes locked in an exploitative relation. Hartmann advocated a 'dual systems' approach that explicitly set out to argue that patriarchy was not a historical relic, superseded by capitalist social formations, but was alive and well. Terms such as 'capitalist patriarchy' (Eisenstein, 1981) and 'patriarchal capitalism' (Hartmann, 1979, 1981) were used to signal a new materialist paradigm of gender analysis.

The concept of patriarchy, then, provides a further key to understanding what a materialist feminist analyses purported to be and is thus vital in appreciating the way in which some academic feminists negotiated a path - one that was both analytical and political - between the critical theory of Marxism and the radical theory of feminism. The main aim of materialist feminists was to develop a materialist foundation for a theory of patriarchy or, for those who were less convinced by the term itself, male dominance (e.g. Cockburn, 1983, 1985; 1990; Delphy, 1984; Hartmann, 1979, 1981; Hartsock, 1987; Walby, 1986; 1990; Witz, 1992). These two

aspects of the materialist feminist/socialist feminist project cannot in fact be disentangled if we are to properly reflect on the genealogy of the concept of the material in feminist sociology.

For Hartmann (1979: 208) patriarchy was 'a social system with a material base' and patriarchal relations were systemic. Patriarchy did not simply exist at the level of ideology (as in Mitchell, 1975) nor could it be reduced to biology and reproduction (as in Firestone, 1974). The concept of the material in feminist sociology was deployed to shift attention away from the perceived overemphasis in radical feminism on biology and reproduction and re-locate the radical feminist concept of patriarchy within a materialist mode of historicisation. Effectively much materialist feminist analyses ended up being 'all work and no play' for two reasons. First, the argument that the meaning of the 'economic', or 'productive', was not exhausted by the wage-labour relation in capitalist employment, but was an equally salient category for exploring gender relations sustained through a marriage, as distinct from an employment, contract within the household (Delphy, 1984; Walby, 1986, 1990). Second, that the material base of patriarchal social relations, which persisted within capitalism, was men's control over women's labour in both the household and the labour market - 'all the social structures that enable men to control women's labour' (Hartmann, 1981: 12). The concept of the material was deployed to de-valorize childbearing, sexuality and ideology and valorize economic or

'productive' activities (meaning the work performed to sustain daily life, whether waged or unwaged) as the axis which sustained male dominance in industrial-capitalist society. However, the meaning of the concept of the material also underwent a subtle shift as it was being deployed within a feminist sociological analytics. We now move on to explore how feminists stretched the concept of the material to encompass more than the economic.

Stretching the material

Marxist-feminists were constantly to-ing and fro-ing between the ideological and the economic, invariably resorting to explanations of women's oppression at the level of ideology rather than the economic. Ironically, Marxist feminists theorised women's oppression within Marxist historical materialism without providing a materialist account of the production of gender and sexuality per se, and increasingly relied upon importing theorists such as Freud or Lacan to get the ideological to do for feminism the analytical work that the economic could not do. Michele Barrett (1990/1980) argued that the proper complement of the ideological was not the economic but the material. However, within the parameters of Marxist historical materialism, the material was treated as largely synonymous with the economic (Cockburn, 1990/1981).

The move to stretch the concept of the material is best illustrated by Cynthia Cockburn's (1990/1981) pioneering conceptualisation of 'the material of male power'. Cockburn, along with many other feminists at the time, argued for a turn away from the ideological towards the material but pushed it one step further by seeking to dislocate the concept of the material from its economic moorings, arguing that 'there is more to the material than the economic' (1990: 86). She stated her intention to 'allow 'the economic' to retire into the background, not to deny its significance but to spotlight (...) other material instances of male power' (Cockburn, 1990: 86). These material instances of male power are the 'concrete practices' through which women are disadvantaged. The economic is just one of the material instances of male power; the socio-political and the physical are two further ones specified by Cockburn.

This move to expand the meaning of the concept of the material beyond the economic was important and influential, and served to challenge the assumption that the material dimensions of women's oppression were synonymous with economic relations. There have been, and continue to be, significant attempts to stretch the material in order to encompass those realms of the social which are missed by the narrowly economic. However, this point has been overlooked in some recent post-structuralist work, notably by Judith Butler (1998) in her counter-positioning of 'the material' and 'the cultural' in contemporary radical politics and theory. In her debate with Fraser over the priority given to sexuality, gender and race, on the one hand, or class, on the other, in radical politics, Butler argues that situating the former cluster as new social movements which occupy the cultural end of the political spectrum serves to reinstate the traditional Marxist emphasis on the material as economic:

The charge that new social movements are 'merely cultural', that a unified and progressive Marxism must return to a materialism based in an objective analysis of class, itself presumes that the distinction between material and cultural life is a stable one (Butler, 1998: 36).

What is interesting here is Butler's contention that the distinction between the material and cultural is no longer a stable or viable one, precisely because this was also implicit in the work of those who sought to put the concept of the material to work for feminism, as demonstrated above.

As Fraser suggests, Butler's characterisation of her (Fraser's) approach misrepresents it as 'an orthodox Marxian economic monism' - a form of economic determinism best understood as the crude base/superstructure model which institutes the

distinction between the 'material' and the 'cultural'. As we emphasise here, this distinction had been contested prior to the arrival of post-structuralism on the scene through a variety of attempts to move beyond reductionist renderings of the material simply as the economic. This selective recuperation by Butler facilitates her argument that the full realm of the social is under-theorised or under-apprehended within Marxist materialism and its feminist variations precisely because her reading reinstates a divide between the realms of the material and the cultural. It therefore allows her to intimate not only that the inclusion of the cultural is necessary, but also that post-structuralist analyses have a privileged purchase on it because of their focus on the *effectivity* of the discursive (i.e. cultural) rather than the *determinism* of the material (i.e. the economic).

However, as we made clear in our introduction, the development of broadly materialist feminisms was intimately linked to attempts to re-locate questions of sexuality and gender within the sphere of the social and thus political.¹ Sexuality in particular was seen as an issue exceeding the province of Marxism and hence 'materialist' analyses which, by definition, were political by virtue of their central analytical emphasis on exploitation. Yet, materialist feminist work of the period argued that sexuality was amenable to materialist analysis. Delphy asserted that 'Feminism, by imprinting the word oppression on the domain of sexuality, has annexed it to materialism' (Delphy, 1984: 217). The concept of the social has also been central to a materialist feminist approach (see Delphy, 1984: 214-215; Jackson, 2000, 2001) which attempts to pull realms of everyday life, such as the subjective, the affective and the sexual, within the domain of materialist analysis, rather than abdicating them to the

¹In view of this ongoing counterposition between the 'material' and the 'cultural', it is salutary to turn the feminist clock back nearly 20 years to Jacqueline Rose's (1990) essay 'Femininity and its discontents', originally published in 1983, when the tensions in feminist thought were represented as between 'materialism' and 'idealism', rather than 'the material' and 'the cultural', and were played out in debates about the salience of psychoanalysis or Marxism for feminist analysis. One of the reasons Rose discerned for feminists discarding psychoanalysis was their inclination towards forms of analysis that are 'more material in their substance and immediately political in their effects' (Rose, 1990: 227), engaging feminist analysis at 'the level of material life' or 'the materiality of being'(Rose, 1990: 229).

realms of psychoanalysis. Hence, in the period when newer terminologies of 'sexuality' and 'gender' were emerging, invariably slip-sliding into one another, Delphy speaks of 'social men and social women' to underscore her critique of 'idealist' frameworks and her insistence that the social and social practice constitute the new analytical terrain of feminism. Broadly materialist feminisms widened the scope of the conventional definition of the material as economic to encompass social relations and practices within the household (Delphy, 1984; Delphy

and Leonard, 1992; Jackson, 1992; Walby, 1986, 1990) and expanded the concept of the material in a bid to capture a range of everyday and institutional practices that previously fell outwith the scope of conventional materialist analyses.

Those working within a broadly materialist paradigm certainly made the political move of asserting that gender and sexuality are not simply within the realm of (relatively unimportant) cultural politics. But let us also make it clear that, whilst we do not concur with Butler's selective recuperation of the concept of the material, we think Butler is correct to contest the constructionism that the initial politicisation bequeathed. What matters is whether there is a limit to which the fabric of the material can be stretched to encompass the full range of practices that constitute the gendered social given that the broadly materialist paradigm of feminist sociological analysis has bequeathed an impoverished or 'hollowed out' concept of the social (Adkins and Lury, 1996) thus creating its own absences that are ripe for colonisation by post-structuralism - most significantly, that which comes to be termed 'the cultural'.

Where we do have accounts of materialist feminism's understanding of this issue, they are, we suggest, notable more for their opacity than their clarity precisely because, as we suggest above, the material is running out of the elasticity that materialist feminism demands of it:

I define myself as a materialist feminist, in the sense that I see gender divisions (and indeed all social divisions and inequalities) as rooted in material social structures and embedded in everyday social practices. Privileging the material in this way does not mean ignoring issues of culture, discourse or subjectivity (...) but it does entail keeping in mind the material social contexts in which cultural products and practices emerge, in which discourses are deployed and subjectivities are constituted (Jackson, 1999: 3).

Are gender divisions co-constituted by material social structures (which they are rooted in) and everyday social practices (which they are embedded in)? Or does the use of the term 'rooted' imply that gender divisions grow out of material social structures to become 'embedded' within everyday social practices? Such horticultural metaphors obfuscate rather than illuminate the meaning of the material, privileging the material in the construction of the gendered social without specifying the precise quality of its 'materiality'. Indeed, Jackson (2000) explicitly acknowledges that a materialist

analysis *per se* cannot apprehend the full range of practices that constitute the gendered social and that 'the time is ripe for a re-evaluation and development of ...

micro-sociological perspectives', namely symbolic interactionism, narratives of self, and phenomenology. In short, this conceptualisation of the material alone seems unable to do the work that materialist feminism needs to do in order to access the expansive terrain of the social ontology of gender and sexuality. Whilst we are happy, therefore, to concur that social practices, discourses/frameworks of meaning, institutions and our interaction with all of these through time and space produce and reproduce social life, we cannot but wonder whether this perspective stretches the concept of the material to the limits of its elasticity. Indeed, we wonder whether it continues to make sense to deploy such an expanded concept of the material to signify a distinctively sociological form of feminism (Jackson, 2000, 2001) because we already have a term which describes the hinterland of the material: the social.

Although this form of materialist constructionism neither reduces sexuality/gender to the 'merely cultural', nor implies a thinly veiled structuralism of the economic, we think it remains difficult to discern how this conceptualisation of the material fills out the 'hollowed out' version of the social inherited from materialism (Adkins and Lury, 1996). What is the quality of the social evoked by contemporary deployments of the concept of the material? What is, precisely, the 'materiality' of the material? In Jackson's work the material is asserted as the bedrock of a feminist sociological analysis of gender and sexuality and privileged over culture and subjectivity and everyday social life, but widened from the economic to include patriarchy, racism, colonialism and imperialism (Jackson, 2001). The material therefore can be understood as the broadly systemic structural, but not a simplistically determinist structural. Rather, Jackson recognises the insights of micro-sociological perspectives - such as Dorothy Smith and George Herbert Mead - which posit that everyday meaning, interaction and practice actually *constitute* the lived experience of the gendered social. Dorothy Smith (1988, 1999) has consistently argued for the importance of structural economic relations in contextualising action and experience whilst at the same time maintaining that we only apprehend such relations through a focus on everyday practices and experiences:

Though bureaucracy, discourse and the exchange of money for commodities create social relations which transcend the local and particular, they are constituted, created and practised always within the local and particular (...) social relations in this sense do not exist in an abstract formal space organised purely conceptually, but as determinate actual processes' (Smith, 1988: 108, 135).

The social for Smith is not simply the material as exclusively economic, but rather 'materialism' is used to conceptualise gendered structures and power relations, whilst phenomenology is deployed to

conceptualise 'the social' as a terrain of meaningful and reiterative enactment of social relations - 'doing' the social as 'determinate actual processes'.

Writers such as Jackson and Smith therefore mobilise perspectives other than a traditional 'materialism' to articulate and capture other senses in which there are meaningful practices and identifications not captured by the concept of the material *per se*, however expansively this is used. Notwithstanding Jackson's recognition (2001) that such perspectives need further development to weave them into materialism, we wonder whether in such deployments the material is simply being substituted for the social since the quality of the 'materiality' being evoked seems to rely upon established sociological analytics - inequalities as systemic, historicisation, cultural systems, and the constituting effect of everyday practices. We can discern that the insistence on 'material' life is an attempt to explain the social ontology of gender and sexuality in a more systemic (but not exclusively economic) yet simultaneously praxiological manner than traditional historical materialism has hitherto allowed. Our concern is whether we can legitimately claim that the distinctive materiality of materialism has any residual conceptual integrity when relativist epistemological frameworks such as interactionism/phenomenology are annexed to complement the realist, determinist bias of materialism.

Hennessy's (1993, 2000) bid to re-juvenate a distinctive materialist feminist perspective confronts precisely this question of what exactly constitutes the materialism of materialist feminism and makes a bold attempt to re-situate materialism within a post-Marxist problematic by disarticulating the ideas of, for example, Foucault and Laclau and Mouffe from their post-modern moorings and rearticulating these within a materialist feminist framework.² However, whilst Hennessy is acutely aware that 'we need analyses of how structures of power function in concrete, local ways' because 'these particulars are important components of the complex historical realities that people live by' (2000:9) her argument is resolutely premised on 'the materialist insight that the kernel of relations between those who produce surplus value and those who appropriate it - the profit making relationships on which capitalism depends - has a determining force' (2000:15).

Again, as with Jackson and Smith above, we see the recognition that materialist feminism's social construction needs to be attuned to lived experience and the ways in which that is a processual instantiation of structural social relations. Indeed, drawing on the work of E.P. Thomson, Hennessy develops an analytical framework which posits class 'as a structured *process* rather than a structural *position*' [our italics] (2000:18). However, although Hennessy's post-Marxist materialist feminism recognises that a key problem of feminist social analytics is how the social is conceptualised, it

²Hennessy's work provides an account of sexual relationships in late capitalism, attempting to connect 'late capitalism's new economic, political and cultural structures' (2000:7) with the significance and experience of both sexuality and the current forms of identity politics organised around sexualities

nonetheless comes to resemble a club sandwich of the social, where post-modern conceptions of language and subjectivity are deployed to develop a theory of the 'materiality of discourse' that is sandwiched between a fairly conventional Marxist problematic of social totalities - which explains social relations causally and incorporates a fairly conventional pre-materialist feminist understanding of the material as the economic - and an understanding of lived experience, identities and subjectivities as 'affected by' capitalism (2000:5) rather than how these elements constitutively *effect* social life. Yet again, stretching the material to the limits of its epistemological elasticity provokes a reflex, which draws us back to either historical materialism or, in the work discussed above, to interactionist/phenomenological sociology.

The materiality of these deployments of the material remains unable to break free of the binding determinism of historical materialism unless radically different epistemologies are deployed to access ontology. The US current of materialist feminism reclaims ontological issues from cultural materialism (post-structuralism) by re-weaving them into a circuit within the conventional terrain of historical materialism - the economic sphere, the mode of production of political economy (Hennessy, 1993, 2000; Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997) whilst European and other North American currents are more concerned, as Hennessy and Ingraham (1997: 10) recognise, to stretch the concept of the material to embrace putatively complementary perspectives which allows the systemic context of materialist relations without distilling gender to a simple reflex of the economic system. It would seem that the concept of the material insofar as it is apprehended within a broadly materialist paradigm, is unable to do the work that it needs to do in order to access the expansive terrain of a social ontology of gender and sexuality. And we wonder whether this is precisely because the scope of a feminist analytics, once so powerfully fuelled by its critical engagement with materialism, is now *impeded* by its attachment to a distinctive materialist epistemology of the social when it is trying to conceptualise a

social ontology of gender and sexuality. This attempt to evoke a materialist ontology - the 'materiality' of materialist feminism - prevents a more expansive feminist sociological theorisation of the social and precludes an opening up of feminist sociological analytics to new agendas that can potentially enrich a social ontology of gender and sexuality. The ongoing debate over the concept of the material in feminism is now being conducted on a terrain traversed by new theoretical frameworks, which are largely responsible for the introduction of new conceptualisations of materiality and materialisation in feminist debate, which we now suggest, may provide a way of unpicking the knot in the material.

Materiality and Materialisation

Feminists working within the broadly post-structuralist Foucauldian paradigm in the area of embodiment have been largely responsible for prompting the emergence of newer notions of materiality and a focus on materialisation (associated most strongly with Judith Butler's 1993 work, *Bodies That Matter*). Whilst we do not deny that there are disjunctures and tensions between the

broadly post-structuralist Foucauldian and the broadly materialist, pre-Foucauldian paradigms, we will insist that this should not obscure a recognition that these terminological shifts are more complex and subtle than is suggested by a simple counter-positioning of, for example, the material and the cultural. These newer terms should be embraced as potentially useful sociological concepts rather than exclusively post-structuralist ones. We argue that the newer terminologies of materiality and materialisation do not simply signal the displacement of the concept of the material by the cultural but can induce feminist constructionism to work with a sociologically more adequate reconceptualisation of the social as a more fully integrated realm of symbolic and material practices, as well as to remit other matters into the realm of the social - most notably body matters. What really matters for us, then, is how we work towards a more comprehensive, social ontology of gender and sexuality and how these newer terminologies of materiality and materialisation help us to attain this goal.

We associate the new terminologies of 'materiality' and 'materialisation' most strongly with the work of Judith Butler and so, after criticising her earlier, we attempt to show how other aspects of her work are potentially productive for materialist feminism. Butler's scrutiny of materiality occurs in the context of her concern that the notion of gender performativity (1990) - designed to wrench feminist thought on gender away from the lingering, residual facticity of 'sex' or 'the body' - inadvertently 'overrode' the matter of 'sex' or 'the body'. Butler sets herself the task of confronting the haunting question of whether social constructionism inevitably and irretrievably

effects a full dematerialisation of 'sex' or 'the body' as gender absorbs or displaces 'sex' (1993: 5). It is vital to recognise that Butler's interrogation of the limits of constructionism in feminist thought encompasses its materialist, radical linguistic and Foucauldian variations. It is also vital to appreciate that this interrogation is specifically geared towards finding ways for bodies to matter within the overall sex/gender problematic of feminist thought but without re-instating an essentialist ontology of substance. In short, she is worrying away at the limits of constructionism *per se*, although she is particularly uncomfortable with her own discursive inclination to dissolve matter. Hence, Butler begins with the concept of material as physical but does not simply accept this philosophical inheritance: crucially, she stretches matter into concepts of materiality and materialisation to denote, respectively, the effect of fixity and the processual/symbolic emergence of matter. Butler relies upon the term 'materialisation' to find a way for bodies to matter within such a post-structuralist revisioning:

What I would propose in place of these conceptions of construction is a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as *a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*. That matter is always materialized has, I think, to be thought in relation to the productive and, indeed, materializing effects of regulatory power in the Foucaultian sense. Thus, the question is no longer, How is gender constituted as and through a certain interpretation of sex? (a question that leaves the 'matter' of sex untheorized), but rather, Through what regulatory norms is sex itself

materialized? And how is it that treating the materiality of sex as a given presupposes and consolidates the normative conditions of its own emergence? (Butler, 1993: 9-10).

The term 'materiality' is deployed to signal the problematic of both physical matter, or corporeality in this case, and crucially, the meaning or significance of that matter. Butler insists that we must neither presume nor negate 'materiality', but 'unsettle' it by freeing it from its 'metaphysical lodgings' and think through the ways in which bodies (i.e. matter) are materialised, that is, can only ever 'come to matter'. Thus, she dislodges understandings of matter as substance and remoulds matter into materiality. Crucially, materiality is no longer thus a static substance but reworked to denote an apparent quality i.e. a temporally specific effect of the 'process of materialisation that stabilises over time' - a concept used to capture the apparent stability or fixity of complex on-going processes of discursive formations, identifications and reiterations.

But what we think is crucial here is that Butler is deploying the term 'materiality' to insist on a recuperation of 'matter' in the face of constructionism of whatever variety, be it materialist, sociological, discursive, or radical linguistic. In short, the term 'materiality' is used to call up a quality that nonetheless remains problematic at the very time as it is called up within any constructionist framework. Butler (1993) admits materiality in order to momentarily retrieve the fleshiness of bodies, but supercedes this by the term 'materialisation' to then insist that bodies can only ever come to matter through discourse and culture. Cultural materialism at its most specific, perhaps, and therefore the focus of strong criticism from a range of materialist feminists (Hennessy, 2000; Ingraham, 1994; Jackson, 2000, 2001).

There is a strong sense in Butler's work that this quality - materiality - is both annoyingly stubborn and illusory: it is admitted into her analysis, even though she immediately defaults to a notion of 'materialization' which is used as an analytical device to give us a purchase on social processes and their 'materializing effects' (1993:5) - recognised as materiality. Put another way, Butler is keen to rotate the focus of social constructionist analysis away from any residual sense of a substantive, ontological foundation of gender and sexuality towards the very social processes that allow the emergence and apparent ontological stability of intelligible genders and sexualities. Materiality is evoked within Butler's work precisely in order to problematise that very quality being evoked. It is *simultaneously* a recognition that materiality exists but that it exists only insofar as it is a momentary apprehension of the 'materialized effects' of the discursive formation of gender.

Thus, whilst one of the criticisms coming from materialist feminists is that post-structuralist deconstructions thwart 'any ability to offer *systematic* accounts of social life' (Butler, 1998) - through the apparent deferral of ontology as the patterned instantiation of social relations - we suggest that materiality as used above, is a fleeting recognition of ontology as systematic, precisely because it is deployed to describe the instantiation of (admittedly discursive) patterned (performatively reiterative)

materialising 'effects'. Notwithstanding the debate about relative priority given to the material and cultural realms³, we argue that we can discern the materiality of Butler as similar terrain to that of materialist feminisms which have de-prioritised the economic, in that both perspectives converge on the problematic of a social ontology of gender and sexuality.

The term materiality has also been deployed in a range of feminist recuperations of the body. Susan Bordo (1993, 1998) and Anne Witz (2000) both use it to recuperate a sense of the embodied practices of gendered and sexualised being that get lost for Bordo in cultural constructionism and for Witz in sociological constructionism. Phillipa Rothfield (1996) similarly uses it, along with the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, to hold onto a stronger sense of the corporeal as 'the material bases of our bodily selves ... that complex of matter that constitutes our sensuous, cultural, kinetic, and physical place in the world' (1997: 33). Iris Marion Young (1994) picks up Sartre's insistence that we never confront anything other than worked and socialised matter – materiality - to explore how bodies of gender are never simply inert, physical objects but are, in Sartrian terminology, *practico-inert* objects, inscribed by and the product of past practices. She uses the term *practical-material* to capture the ways in which bodies of gender are constituted through vectors of action and meaning. Although Bordo (1998) struggles with how it is precisely that she wants to retain a sense of 'materiality', like Young she sees this as an important concept retaining a sense of 'practical, fleshly bodies' (Bordo, 1998: 91). Bordo is particularly concerned that poststructuralism displaces the materiality (corporeality) of the body with an overemphasis on 'cultural plasticity' and uses the term materiality to signal a refusal to accept the limits of constructionism in conceptualising (and ultimately dissolving) body matters. This emphasis on the 'practical' is useful whilst the term materiality is being used to signal the sociality of matter. Moreover, a twin sense of the materiality of 'being' and practicality of 'doing' bodies potentially links in well with the less embodied but similarly practical 'doing' of the gendered social - that sense of 'materiality' as actual practices and actions - that is to be found lurking within the broadly materialist feminist sociology discussed above (c.f. Smith, 1988, 1999; Jackson, 1999; Hennessy, 2000).

The social constructionism being worked at here is not one that is limited by physical matter, but rather one that is able to incorporate body matters as an indivisible part of lived gendered experience and action. Thus the scope of the social or the cultural evoked in this newer literature confronts the limits of constructionism, whether sociological or discursive, by sometimes admitting, sometimes asserting the body as a problematic yet inescapable component of a social ontology of gender and sexuality. Crucially, there is a different sort of material on the agenda of feminism - the 'matter' of bodies - and it is one that feminist materialism has often avoided because of its preoccupation to render gender and sexuality as social issues rather than natural ones. But the materiality of bodies is

³See in particular Michele Barrett's 'Words and Things' (1992, 1999) for an excellent teasing out of the tensions between materialist and post-structuralist epistemologies of the social.

not about their 'naturalness'. Rather, it seems to us that there is an attempt to consider the *social* effectivity of the physical - materiality

as embodiment, experienced and rendered meaningful within gendered and sexualised frameworks of meaning and action – or, as Clough puts it, the 'sociality of matter' (2000).

What really matters? The elusive quality of materiality

Do the divergent epistemological routes to the quality of materiality we have discerned above necessarily undermine attempts to utilise a post-materialist sense of the materiality in a relentlessly social ontology of gender and sexuality? Whilst materialist feminisms attempt to deploy a sense of materiality in order both to counter the discursive constructionism of poststructuralism, particularly the valorization of texts and representation, and to assert the importance of everyday practices as more concrete, and indeed more consequential, than discourses (Hennessy 2000, Jackson, 1999, 2000, 2001; Smith, 1988, 1999), one can discern undertows in these current that drag us back to either the structural economic (Hennessy, 2000) or micro-sociological focuses on 'determinate actual processes' of everyday social practice (Smith 1988, Jackson 1999, 2001). In other contemporary feminisms the term is being used with a quite different epistemological inheritance, either a somewhat uncertain realism to evoke 'matter', particularly the fleshliness of bodies (Bordo, 1998), or to completely relativise and defer ontology in post-structuralism (Butler, 1993).

Do these differences really matter? They matter enough to suggest that materialist feminism cannot simply assert the material as central to its constructionism but must respond to the twin limits of its own brand of materialist constructionism: matters arising out of the residual facticity of the body; and the post-structuralist insistence on the constitutive effect of meaning and representation. We suggest that materialist feminisms may find a productive engagement with these challenges by foregoing the need to insist on social life as 'material' and recognising the implicit admission in the logic of this claim: the *materialist* concept of the material cannot stretch to cover the social. The more recent conceptualisations of materiality and materialisation make a discernible attempt to expand our understanding of the social ontology of gender and sexuality: both in the sense that materialist feminism has been somewhat sanguine about the lingering 'foundational ontology' of gender and sexuality - how bodies come to matter (Hughes and Witz, 1997); and in the sense that the body exudes a 'materiality' that is more doggedly 'fleshly' than either a materialist or post-structuralist reading permits (Bordo, 1993, 1998; Hughes & Witz, 1997; Rothfield, 1996; Turner, 1996; Witz, 2000).

Notwithstanding their epistemological departure points, broadly materialist and broadly post-structuralist paradigms are attempting to access the same ontological terrain - the *construction* of gendered and sexualised being and relations. And, yes, they approach this terrain from different directions: one from a conventional, yet expanded, materialist-structuralist ontology of the social; one from a post-structuralist position that radically defers the ontological status of 'the material'.

Nonetheless, the deployments of materiality as a route to a social ontology of gender and sexuality do share a concern with effectivity: materiality as the 'effects' of discourse (Butler, 1993); materiality as the social context and configuration of discourse (Hennessy, 2000); materiality as the everyday effectivity of social process, practice and experience (Smith, 1988; Jackson 2001); and materiality as the practical effect of corporeality (Bordo, 1998). If we can understand materiality as an attempt to conceptualise and interrogate elements of gendered and sexualised ontological intelligibility and process, then we can begin to understand it across a range of diverse work as an attempt to understand what precisely effects or materialises - in the sense of bringing into being - gendered and sexualised sociality, embodiment and identity. Materialist feminisms need to worry away at their rendering of 'materiality' as 'practices' of the social which breathe life and meaning into gendered and sexualised being and relations, rather than simply to assert 'the material' as specific sorts of practices (whether economic, systemic, structural) which are accorded causal priority in shaping gender relations.

The quality that materiality allegedly evokes is nonetheless still elusive. Post-structuralism may have a more confident notion of materiality as effected through discourses, but even in this case we need elaboration of the context and configurative power of differences in discourses - why are some texts and representations more *effective* than others. However, as an answer to this question we suggest that it does not profit contemporary materialist feminist analysis to insist on a prioritisation of 'the material', since this defaults either into a way of asserting the causal priority of 'structures' - be these of patriarchy, gender (Jackson, 2000, 2001) or capitalism (Hennessy, 1993, 2000) - or a vacuous substitution of the material for the social. Rather, we suggest that we abandon a prioritisation of a materialist ontology of the social *per se*, because it seems to us that it is only this move which will permit the more astute development of a social ontology of gender and sexuality. The move away from structural determinism that characterised so much feminist materialist and materialist feminist work, particularly within sociology, leads towards a conceptualisation of 'practices' as constitutive of the social in the most expansive sense of the word. A praxiological account of gender and sexuality recognises how

practices are both constrained by structures and generative of gendered and sexualized agency (see McNay, 2000), whilst permitting the use of sensitising concepts such as, for example, the social and the discursive to designate different sorts of practices, as well as the material and the symbolic to designate different sorts of resources (Fraser, 1997, 1998). Above all, the 'material' can no longer be simply stretched within a broadly materialist paradigm of the social but what is required - rather than a simple elasticity - is a shift to a more porous rendering of materiality which is permeable to the more fluid understandings of ontology which have emerged from current challenges to materialism.

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