

## THE FEMINIST CHALLENGE TO TOTEMS AND ICONS: LESS ART AND MORE MATTER

**GOUX, JEAN-JOSEPH.** *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*  
Translated by Jennifer Curtiss Gage. Ithaca: Cornell University Press  
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This is an engaging book, engrossing even, which is a considerable accomplishment given the issues it takes on and the goal it sets out for itself. The goal is not easily seen until the final two essays of the book, in which it becomes clear that all is discussed with a view to advancing materialist thought and updating it from essentially Marx and Freud - as the title of the English translation already suggests. The effort is therefore, a rather timely one, since neither Marx nor Freud have survived very well the rapidly changing exigencies of the end of the twentieth century. If the materialist orientation is to be revived at all, some worthy scholarly effort is indeed in order. This badly needed relief for materialism is to be found, as it turns out, not in the outmoded Marxist approach, but rather in the direction staked out by Engels. This greater philosophical discussion is not carried out, however, for its own sake alone. Rather, it serves as the backdrop, to be more accurate, as the justification for what I will refer to loosely as the women's movement or simply feminism, since there seems to be no attempt to be more explicit than that in the book.

The case that is made for the legitimization of woman's equal (central?) role in society is indeed a serious one. Rather than engaging in a specious diatribe on our much maligned Western philosophy as being the source of all present-day ills, Goux reaches into a sketchy, but solid outline of Western thought, in order to establish a context upon which to graft his proposal. In other words, he knows all too well the tradition he is attempting to undermine and for that reason presents solid credentials for making a bid to eclipse that tradition in some way. His expression appears at first to be difficult, but it becomes unraveled through a

D persistent reading and an eventual realization that the terms he uses have several levels of meaning. The reader gathers over some years of experience in reading some of the giants of criticism: Barthes, Derrida, Lacan, Levy-Strauss, et al., that this is part of the word game of the modern struggle to reforge reality by reforming language; to restore concreteness in reality by insisting on the origins of words. Thus, the critic invests old words with forgotten meaning (materia = mater) and in so doing claims to recover a perspective on reality which has heretofore been lost. Equating the mother, the female with matter, with the material is not, of course, lost on the reader. The salvation of the materialist orientation, therefore, is accomplished through a concrete reading of the word: materialism is equated with female; materialism is redeemed by woman; and woman in return is legitimized by materialism.

Opposed to this maternal/materialist orientation is the assumed paternal/materialist stage which has characterized our history of class struggle, which has up to now been separated from nature, has even been opposed to nature. If in nature we find woman, the mind is the lair of the male. If in materialism is found the womb, in idealism is found the phallus which Goux refreshingly hastens not to equate with the penis. We are thus left with the task of restoring this separation between man and nature, between man and woman, which came about as a result of establishing civilization, as a result of man's setting himself above the rest of creation via the incest taboo. If in nowhere else in the animal kingdom is this fetish to be found, then this indeed becomes the distinguishing characteristic of humankind. But in so doing it is the male who establishes the identity of the species pre-empting the active and like incentive of the female counterpart. This process on the psychological level is matched in a very poignant way on the sociological level as well according to the explanation offered by Engels. Man distances himself from nature through work, technology and language. In this way, he is no longer a part of nature, but rather he is the lord of nature which he works to use for his own ends unlike the rest of animal creation. Man triumphs over the material through thought and action, but passes on to a further stage of realizing that this dominance is merely illusory. This awareness brings about a desire for reconciliation with the rejected mater,

with a desire for being once again a part of a human history where the class struggle is unnecessary.

This reconciliation, then, must come about as a result of eliminating the intermediary terms of resolving conflicts: the incest taboo, work, and language. We are indebted to Goux for pointing out - and this constitutes his main contribution - that all the intermediary terms are patterned alike. The phallus is hidden by the mater as the sexless fetish placed on a pedestal; by the currency which allows for the acquisition of goods; by the rhetoric which assures status and seduction. (For a more detailed discussion of the notions of intermediate terms and the function of exchange and substitution, the reader is referred to the opening chapters of the book.) This pattern of hiding, of covering underlying causes for surface characteristics, struggles, etc. is precisely the endeavour of Freud, Marx, and Saussure. This practice, I would add, has been continued in more recent times in a more explicit way by Chomsky. In each thinker, we have abstract idealism attempting to explain a phallic history of concealment via intermediary terms. Saussure's distinction between langue and parole besides being defined as 'language system shared by the community' vs. 'individual realization of the system', respectively, has never really been defined precisely, beyond being described as an inventory of signs with combinatory instructions exhausting only a small fraction of the possibilities. Although not mentioned by Goux, it was left to Chomsky to propose a theory of competence and performance which like Saussure distinguished between the social and the individual, but which was to insist on the lack of isomorphy between a surface structure and an underlying system. Thus, surface form conceals deep structure.

Reconciliation with nature, therefore, the yearning of the nineteenth century romanticist, endures even through the present century. To achieve this, paternalistic idealism which has spawned unsatisfactory attempts to deal with nature, must give way to the "concrete" or the "natural" - as it has been referred to in linguistic circles of the 1970's and 1980's. Mat(t)er must be allowed to speak for her/itself without the intermediate terms which have been imposed by phallic idealism. In this regard, I offer the example from anthropological linguistics of Malinowski

(Review of M. M. Lewis, *Infant Speech*, in *Nature* 140, 1937, pp 172-173.) who urged very early on abandoning the langue-parole distinction in favor of the direct observation of language, not as an abstract system, but rather as a living part of the situational context. Similarly, Goux attempts to draw our attention to what he calls the Immaculate Conception in order to make a parallel, if not identical proposal.

Goux makes an error in his use of the term "Immaculate Conception". This, however, does not in itself invalidate his point which will be discussed presently. Although the translator makes an attempt to explain it away (p. 225), it is clearly an error and worth mentioning since it is not unrelated to the main thrust of his book. The Immaculate Conception, of course, to its adherents refers to the perfectly normal, sexual conception of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the womb of her mother, Ann, without what is usually referred to as the stain (macula) of original sin. The justification given to the faithful is usually that the vessel which was to contain the God/Man had to be free of all sin including the sin of Adam. This is clearly distinct from the asexual conception of Jesus, according to the belief of Catholic and Orthodox Christians, in the womb of his mother Mary. Thus, the Immaculate Conception and the conception of Jesus are two entirely distinct and different events removed from each other in time, although related to each other in what was eventually to become known as the redemptive plan. In any event, Goux draws on this example in order to focus on the asexual conception of Jesus as an example of the relationship of mother and son without the intermediary of father. The existence of the latter would precipitate the separation of the son from the mother, thereby breaking the material/maternal bond in violation of nature. In the case of the asexual conception of Jesus, however, the Father is of an entirely different nature from the Mother; and the expression (Verbum) of their commitment to each other takes on the natures of both and becomes the God/Man. For this reason, "the myth signifies that procreation is spiritual par excellence. It signifies that reproduction is essentially ideal reproduction, the transmission of symbolic capital, and that the father is the agent and the guarantor of this process, while secondary, material generation is the woman's function" (p. 225).

Christians, while quibbling with the purely metaphorical interpretation of the beginning of the redemption story, might have, nonetheless, some inclination to agree with Goux's purely spiritual "born-again" interpretation. His point is for all that well taken. Rather than being raised up, honored, and rewarded by being made the Mother of God, the Virgin, according to Goux, is used as simply material to be informed by the male deity. Thus, she becomes Mater Dei rather than Dei Genitrix. But this takes place even here despite the absence of a paternal intermediary who removes the son from the mother - even here in the absence of the father there is a necessity for the reconciliation of man with nature, of the son with the mother. There, therefore, remains the need for removing the fetish of mater in order to restore her to her natural role as genitrix. This would seem to indicate at first that Goux's solution by removing intermediate terms is not sufficient to restore man to nature, for even in his proposed parallel of the Christian myth, where the mother and son are not separated by an intervening Father, there is a need for reconciliation. But Goux anticipates this objection by insisting that even here the son is created in the image of the father and that the mother is of service only to the extent that she can provide the materia of the procreative enterprise. The Christian myth, of course, has its own way of achieving that restoration with nature. The man is cast in the role of a victim ("Fiat voluntas tua."), while the woman is assigned the role of the servant ("Ecce ancilla Domini. Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum."). Their reconciliation with nature, which is viewed in terms of victory, is assured only in the fulfillment of these roles. Goux, however, has another agenda in mind: the elimination of the father in order to reconcile the mother with the son and thereby restore them to what he considers to be their more natural roles. The family has then been reduced to the status of the unnatural artifact of Western civilization.

*Symbolic Economics: After Marx and Freud* is an important book. It gives a coherent accounting of Western man's view of himself and points to a direction that the writer argues should be taken for the development of human society. As such it presents a "conception of conception", which is done through one means and one means only, however, namely the very logos of materialism. Once again, in spite of all attempts to the contrary, we find ourselves forced to resort to the

intermediary, this time to the intermediary of language. Thus, abstract idealism as expressed by language is the very means by which this book has been created. The materialist endeavour par excellence, the procreative, analytic activity which separates man from nature is the primary, nay the only vehicle for the advancement of the materialist cause. Thus, we find that materialism can be advanced only by means of the phallus, through argumentation, analysis and reason. Matter can speak for itself only by reducing man to silence, thereby maintaining him in his status as son.

Since this is the case, we should not resist the temptation to speculate why such a situation should prevail despite the intense efforts to break down the linguistic totem and its twin, the idealistic icon. Somehow the creativity of man follows him undaunted even into the deepest recesses of matter, which he takes even greater delight in recreating and in bringing to life. The fertility of his creative urge and the willingness of nature to accept his schemes are what hold out the hope for his greatest satisfaction. If man is to be restored to nature, it can not be simply for him to be there. Matter must afford the opportunity for continuing creativity, for the constant probing for excellence, the satisfaction of which is at least one valid version of the sweetest jouissance. Thus, man remains unrepentant. His idealism follows him even into the deepest narrows of his materialism, and he will always revel in his accomplishments. The writer of *Symbolic Economics: After Marx and Freud* certainly has the right to revel in his.

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