Caste and the Secular Self

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The sex [caste] of the addresser awaits its determination by or from the Other.' (Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*)

I would like to focus on the solipsism of the secular self with regard to caste. It will not be denied, I think, that until V.P. Singh decided to implement the Mandal Commission Report, caste had no place in the narrative milieu of the secular self. It was not that caste was ignored, but a certain opacity was nevertheless always attached—*no doubt, still is—to it; its use was always surrounded by* embarrassment, uneasiness, ambivalence and, sometimes, even guilt. It is important, it seems to me, to reflect on the historical and cultural reasons for the non-availability, as it were, of caste as a category for critical reflection (you will, of course, recognize the retrospective wisdom of this question, but it should tell us something about the constitution of the secular self). Why has caste become, to use Clifford Geertz's term, an 'experience-distant' concept? (Interestingly, Geertz gives *caste as an example of experience-near concept for Hindus and Buddhists!*) (see Geertz 1983: 57–58).

What I wish to explore here is the place of caste in the cultural narratives of the secular self. In a recent article, Gyanendra Pandey has argued that the nationalist historiography has basically been writing the biography of the Indian nation-state (Pandey 1992). We could extend this insight to claim that a large part of our intellectual discourse has in fact been an autobiography of the secular (read: upper-caste) self, its origin, its conflict with tradition, its desire to be modern. The intimate, and, doubtless, interanimating, connection between the biography of the nation-state and the autobiography of the secular self structures, in ways that we have barely begun to understand, our relationship to caste. It would not be difficult to show, I think, that these diverse narratives have the structure of a *Bildungsroman*, if, with Bakhtin, we take that term to mean: learning to be a citizen in the modern state (Bakhtin 1981: 234). The term 'secular' has of late got locked into a

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battle with the term 'communal'. Consequently, its use in that ideological register seems to be submerging its other significations. As a 'keyword' in our political culture as much as in our cultural politics, 'secular', however, has a more varied and heterogenous career in India, which, or so it seems to me, can only be understood by reconstructing the cultural elaborations of modern subjectivity. If we were to undertake a Benjaminian history of the childhood of 'midnight's' (and the immediately pre- and post-midnight's) children, we would surely find not only the dreamworld of commodities (those chocolate-boxes, biscuit-tins, hair-oils and radios), not only the rituals and ceremonies of fashioning the national self, the citizen-subject, but also the everyday acts of identification and disavowal that responded to the cultural imperative, 'be modern!' We do not yet know how to write that history of our modernity, of the Indian modern—our historical imagination, unfortunately, being as impoverished as (no doubt, as some would say, because it was fashioned by the imperatives of) our secular politics.

In order to understand the 'repression' of caste in this process, we would need to (i) describe how the imaginary horizon that constituted the secular self forced it to 'freeze' caste as a social institution by disavowing it publicly and politically; (ii) delineate the mechanisms by which the élite invented/appropriated the symbolic order of modernity to exercise the power to nominate, classify and represent. In the public sphere the élite has used English—obviously English here is more than simply a language; it is also a juridical/legal apparatus, also a political idiom, in short, a semiotic system signifying modernity, etc.—to impose its secular categories on the social world. This imposition was, undoubtedly, made possible by the élite's complicity with official nomination, in so far as the state, as Bourdieu puts it, is the holder of the monopoly on legitimate symbolic violence. How else to explain our use of SC/ST as political categories, defining the terms of our relationship with whole communities, with ourselves? In having repressed caste this way, the secular self is now finding itself at a loss to handle the return of the repressed (if, in a superficial way, we can characterize Mandal in that way). How do we, then, characterize the social antagonisms that have caused the dislocation of the secular self, that is to say, its ability to be a collective imaginary, the disintegration of the terms that constituted the imaginary of the secular: progress, planning, democracy, etc? The progressivist narrative of liberal humanism (the emancipatory narrative of the left being, in this respect, a variation of it) outlines a trajectory of self-fashioning where the self gradually sheds its ethnic, caste, linguistic and gender markers and attains the abstract identity of the citizen or becomes an individual. In his brilliant analysis of the philosophical and historical coordinates that make possible the emergence of the citizen-subject in Europe, Etienne Balibar argues that:

> If the citizen's becoming-a-subject takes the form of a dialectic, it is precisely because *both* the necessity of 'founding' institutional definitions of citizen and the impossibility of ignoring their contestation—the infinite contradiction within which they are caught—are crystallized in it.[1]

Emerging out of the subject of monarchy, and replacing the king and his double body, the citizen-subject, as 'an elementary term of an "abstract state", is caught in the 'juridical-administrative' epoche of 'cultural' and 'historical' differences that seeks 'to create its own condition of possibility'. (Balibar 1991: 54) Caught in this dialectic the citizen-subject will constantly engender his doubles, thereby forever complicating, even subverting, the progressivist narrative even while realizing it in paradoxical forms. What are the concrete forms in which, in our society, this trajectory is disturbed, challenged, and reversed? Would it be plausible to speculate that caste, rather than being a 'primitive' and 'traditional' thing, is an entirely modern thing, in the precise sense that its invention, as the double of the secular self, is entirely the doing of the citizen-subject?

Not being in a position to undertake a genealogy of the Indian modern that these questions call for, I offer various tentative and exploratory remarks or hypotheses. These remarks can also be read as notes for a heterobiography of the secular self. How can, you might object, the subject of autobiography also write its own heterobiography? But that autobiography has been stitched together from very diverse material, excluding and rewriting situations and practices—though the effect of it is indeed the seemingly unitary subject that we have designated as the secular self. The heterobiography has been scripting itself all the while leaving its marks on the secular self and its narratives. It cannot, however, be conceived of as a counter-discourse—fully formed, autonomous, with its own subject and idiom; it will not have the homogeneity, either in its structure or in its effect, of the secular discourse since such a heterobiography takes form or comes into effect as nodes of resistance, partially and plurally, but not collectively and univocally. In short, the heterobiography of the secular self cannot be thought of as an(other) autobiography of a non-secular self. That is to say, really, to assemble these notes for a heterobiography of the secular self, then, is to examine the possibility of conceiving of caste politics differently. In this regard, however, my task here is the more modest one of raising what I take to be an inescapable question now. Gender (and race, too) as a critical concept, has become constitutive of everyday cultural politics. It is not easy to disavow gender oppression when feminism exerts its pressure most in the middle-class milieu. But caste seems to exist, for the secular self, only as a statistical macrostructural problem of policy, at best, or as the deplorable primitive practices that infect, contaminate or corrupt the secular body politic, at worst. Why is this so? If politics is the attempt to rethink and reshape 'the terms of our practical and passionate relationship' to one another,[2] it seems imperative to address the politics of caste. So I begin with two related hypotheses regarding the 'repression' (if that is the right word) of caste and examine the politics of its representation. Then I draw upon feminist theory to suggest ways of reconceptualizing caste and caste politics.

First, the hypothesis regarding why caste has been repressed or has become an experience-distant concept: the problem of language. After Wittgenstein, and certainly after post-structuralism, we have learnt to view language as constitutive of experience, of social practices. When the metropolitan subjectivity constitutes

itself in English, caste has to be approached at one remove, as it were, as an experience-distant concept. At one level, English as a sign of modernity seems to remove or mark out the élite from the active traces of social conflict. But this marking is at once too gross or massive, and this fact has made us blind to the enormous complexity of the issue. Because the problem of language (of vernaculars) has always been underwritten by a certain narrative of loss, defeat, betrayal, guilt, it is all the harder, in the face of the aggressive defensiveness of the elite, to conceptualize other, more significant, political and epistemological problems posed by language. To speak about caste, or to theorize it, in English, in the political idiom however eclectic it may be, that English makes available, is already to distance caste practice as something alien to one's subject position. It is as though in English one only engages, as it were, in second-order discourse about caste, that discourse itself being seen as discontinuous with caste practices. Caste, then, becomes repressed by being driven into the private domain—a domain, significantly enough, where very often the vernacular is deployed. Of course, this schematic model needs to be complicated in various ways. For example, I seem to be implying that the subject position of secularism is only available in English and, by further implication, to the élite. In so far as what is at issue is the institutionalization of a certain idiom, it is obviously the case that that subject position has come to be available to vernacular speakers as well. Conversely, to the extent that the mechanism by which the élite has tried to impose its categories (let us remember that, etymologically, to categorize means 'to accuse publicly') has also been appropriated or translated by the subalterns, even the subject position structured by English finds itself participating in the first-order discourse of caste. English, of course, has always participated in that discourse; but it could, at one time, claim or pretend to be free from it precisely because it acted as though it were a metalanguage vis-à-vis caste and other 'traditional' objects and practices. And consequently, those who appropriated English could claim a subject position which was free from caste-marks, especially in the public sphere—which by definition was secular.[3] Furthermore, since the public sphere was narrowly construed as the sphere governed by secular categories, the splitting of the secular subject along the caste/class axis also overlapped, to a considerable extent, with the private/public axis. English became a mark of class and the secular character of the self was evident in its use of the liberal humanist categories in public life. In the private domain—often, as I have said, seen as the domain of the vernacular—caste practices could be reiterated or reinvented.

It is important to map the diverse forms of this split in order to analyse how the public/private divide operates in concealing/revealing caste discourse and conflicts. As long as we remember to qualify the contrast English/vernacular in the way I have just suggested (the subject position implied by English is not unavailable to the subject position assumed by the vernacular language speakers, and increasingly the converse too holds), we can understand how both the following propositions could be true simultaneously: the claim by the elite upper-caste secular person that he is not casteist, that he does not in any way practise caste; and the claim, often in the form of an accusation directed at the elite by dalits,

this person is indeed practising, deploying or reiterating caste. What is at here is captured very well by Sudipta Kaviraj when he talks about 'the hos- infamiliarity between elite and subaltern semiotics.[4] We now have a situation re the elite semiotics, especially its political idiom, has failed to transcode the altern semiotics (arguably the latter's hostility was to the transcoding operation, which it found its own idiom or semiotics always alienated in the elite semio-; and the latter is in no position to transcode the elite idiom, although partial propriation or translation has undeniably taken place. But the more the appro- ation or hybridization, the more the hostility. Thus despite the considerable, if mmetric, mutual imbrication of the two semiotics, they nevertheless seem to invent themselves as separate and hostile. The state itself, then, becomes both the ent and victim of this process.

The second hypothesis regarding the repression of caste: caste representation nd class semiotics. For secular liberals as well as leftists, thinking in terms of caste morally distasteful; for leftists, thinking in terms of class is a normative require- ent as much as an explanatory one. But it has never been made clear how a description of social reality given entirely in class terms can account for social ex- periences of antagonisms and divisions which have their provenance in caste (for example, caste violence inflicted on dalits). The point is to realize that caste and class are not competing for causal space (nor do gender and class compete for causal space). Analysing class formation in economic terms may be a methodological necessity; but a social theory that posits a methodological necessity as a causal priority is unlikely to tell us much about the social antagonisms produced by the convergence and divergence of different identity formations. Caste and gender designate not substantive entities but *relations* in the social field of power; they do not pre-exist those relations. Since class too is a relational matter, it is always a question of analysing, in specifiable historical contexts, the inter-sections and inter-articulation, the tensions and conflicts, of different identity formations.

The very different kind of attempt, by liberal sociologists, to reduce or confine caste to politics (understood, if not always defined, as election politics) is in some ways analogous to reducing gender to 'women's problems'—problems of the 'private' domain: both are attempts to suppress or contain the political (in the broader sense) nature of social antagonisms. How do they characterize caste? Very often, in the social science literature as well as in journalistic articles, caste is turned into a substance (what has happened to caste? how has caste changed?), something that undergoes change, but nevertheless persists through time. Social scientists who claim that caste is on its way out—the malignant substance finally expelled from the body of the social—also assert that it exists only in politics (they don't seem to realize that they are begging the question). Of course, politics for them has a narrow meaning; it is a delimited sphere—election campaigns, choosing candidates, ministry formations, village-board elections, etc. But even so, explaining caste without taking into account its logics of representation (in all its senses, including that of the representational politics of democracy) has the consequence of mystifying caste. The secular subject had, of course, tried to expunge caste from its milieu by

confining it to the anthropological domain, namely, 'traditional' India. Having 'naturalized' caste anthropologically, it has been even claimed that it is disappearing in the face of a rapidly modernizing India (well, there are inter-caste marriages, people do seem to eat together at least in 'modern' spaces, and so forth). This is not the place to show that the social scientific representation of caste itself elaborates, often in conjunction with the ideology and the representational politics of the post-colonial state, a particular caste politics. The point I wish to make here is simply that caste does not pre-exist the different, often conflicting, representational practices and institutional structures which articulate it. We cannot understand caste practices without taking into account, for example, the Imperial census, royal politics, creation of vote-banks, institutional exclusions, media stereotypes, etc. Such constructivism, of course, alarms the positivists and realists, though they find it hard to explain the source of their alarm. They take constructivism in this context to imply the claim that caste does not exist; what they mean by 'existence,' however, is always left unclear.

I suggest that we analyse caste and class as semiotic or representational concepts. The advantage of treating caste and class (and, of course, gender) as semiotic formations is that instead of positing them as preconstituted identities one could show them to be actively constructed, represented, in medical and scientific discourses, in newspapers, public policies, court-rooms, assemblies, secretariats, films, streets, seminars, in the privacy of homes, in expressions of contempt and of insults, in, of course, struggles, and so forth. (With Peirce we understand semiosis as a relation between sign, its object, and its interpretant: by showing how modification of consciousness results in a *'habit'*, or experience, semiotics explains the complex relationship between experience, power and representation. To understand class, caste and gender as semiotic concepts is to begin to get a handle on the problem of representation in all its polysemy.) Thus, instead of adding on caste and gender to the 'primary' category of class, one can begin to analyse the political and ideological intersections which produce, maintain and foreground, any of those identities. That they seem to be self-subsisting entities, with their intelligibility given by their self-identity, is the result of the reification of these categories by social scientific discourse. These categories do not exist in the world outside of the struggle by the social agents to impose their views, their classifications, their categories on the world, and the social scientific discourse is continuous with, or participates in, this struggle over the knowledge of the social world. ('Knowledge of the social world and, more precisely, the categories which make it possible, are the stakes, par excellence, of political, the inextricably theoretical and practical struggle for the power to conserve or transform the social world by conserving or transforming the categories through which it is perceived.' Bourdieu 1985: 202) Feminist theorists have been able to combine such a radical nominalism with constructivism in order to transform gender into a critical category. They have been able to show that sexual difference, rather than being natural and prediscursively given, is produced by various apparatuses, and produced differently in different cultural and historical contexts. By taking gender as a relational category, they are

further able to show how gender identity is not 'always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts' (Butler 1990: 3). In the last section we will try to draw out the epistemological and political implications of such a position.

The point for our present argument is simply that it should be possible to deploy both caste and class nominalistically and constructivistically. Doing so would enable us to disturb the politically and epistemologically crippling (but also comforting) division of labour that exists in the academy. Sociologists studying the village, for example, are preoccupied with caste; but they have no *interest* in analysing its intersections with class and gender, except perhaps occasionally noting their presence. Consequently, the character of conflict and antagonism remains untheorized and unaccounted for. Cultural theorists studying Hindi films, to take the extreme and now fashionable case, would not even ask why caste does not even enter his/her frame. In one case, caste is massively, substantially present; in the other case it becomes completely invisible. The attempt to make caste a critical concept like gender would, in fact, require that we first re-examine and critique the way class and gender have been employed in the Indian academic context. Let me now try to draw out what I take to be some of the implications of what I have been discussing for an analysis of the present conjuncture.

Identity: its excess and absence: if, as Denise Riley (1988: 110 and *passim*) has persuasively argued, the category 'women' has historically suffered from an excess of identity, it would seem that 'caste' has suffered from (public) non-identification; it has been disavowed. That at least is the story that the secular self likes to tell. What has in fact happened is that caste too has suffered from an excess of identification, but the burden of this excess has been borne by members of the 'lower caste'. Even in the most liberal version of the story of the secular disavowal of caste, especially when the narrative milieu of the storyteller is a little heterogeneous (causing some disturbance in the logic of the narrative and a split in the narrator), one often notices a certain slippage that equates caste exclusively with lower-caste.[5] The slippage is systematic rather than accidental; and the mechanism that enables this slippage or equation can only be understood by analysing the double semiotic of class and caste that is available, as an enunciative and performative possibility, to the subject position of the elite. The upper-castes do not, or so they claim, experience caste; it is not a subjective reality for them; but they would admit to its facticity—an objective given. Whereas the semiotics of caste has been imposed upon the lower-castes. They are 'locked' into their identities. The repression or disavowal of caste by the secular self, then, has the seemingly paradoxical consequence of producing an excess of identity for the lower-castes. The double semiotic of caste and class has allowed the 'upper-castes' considerable mobility of identity. This becomes evident whenever the mobilization by the lower-castes puts pressure on the elite and the state; then the elite begin to redefine their relationship to their political idiom. Just when the secular/democratic language of rights and equality, which has so far been the preserve, as well as the mark, of the upper-caste subjects, is being appropriated by the hitherto disenfranchised, the

elite articulate a semiotics which operates a double register, switching between caste semiotics and class semiotics.[6] All the evils of contemporary India are attributed to 'western' institutions and idioms; Gandhi's critique of modernity suddenly becomes attractive; shades of nativism or, what comes to the same thing, neo-brahmanism, become noticeable across a whole spectrum of discourse. But 'merit' and 'efficiency' are defended with renewed vigour. If this seems puzzling, let us recall that the nationalist elite not only mobilized the secular idiom in their fight against the British, they also drew from the orientalist discourse on India.

It seems clear from the political and economic trajectory of India that the emergence of the global middle-class will inevitably accentuate the existing divisions even as social and cultural experience will be recoded in such a way that the burden of identity will continue to be borne entirely by dalits. In this context, if we take the social as nothing but frozen politics, what kind of politics will defreeze caste or render it less opaque? If it is already beginning to happen (and I think a plausible case can be made to this effect), how do we recognize and elaborate its political idiom? The dilemma of the political presents another kind of opacity which is related to the dislocation of social identity. We have witnessed over the last decade a collapse of the self-legitimizing narratives supporting the elite political idiom. (Let me say quickly that it is pointless either to mourn it or to celebrate it.) The Bharatiya Janata Party has attempted to suture the dislocation by representing the collective imaginary of Hindu nationalism; the latter is proposed as a principle of reading and of representing the dislocation. If globally and nationally, democracy, market and media have emerged as the new 'floating signifiers' creating and structuring the subject positions of the new and rapidly globalizing middle class, how do we situate the *re-emergence of caste itself*? Can it be proposed as an alternative principle of reading and representing the dislocation, and thus as proposing a different politics? (As a corollary of this, the 'reservation' issue should be seen less as a problem of social policy than as possibly an attempt to create a new imaginary that may open up a collective horizon for the formation of different political subjectivities.) One of the tasks in this context of flux and dislocation is surely to generate critical descriptions which create tensions in the social field of experience, whether constituted by the state or by social theory or narrativized by the elite. It is one way of interrupting the dominant or institutionalized cultural narratives.

For a quick illustration let us take up the problem of the state in caste politics. Caste politics, as we know, has so far been confined to demanding that the state honour its constitutional commitments to equality. But when the state sees itself as an active modernizer, it posits its 'subjects' (those upon whom it acts) as not-yet citizens or as 'passive citizens'. Inevitably, then, its ideology gives rise to paternalism and cynicism. The 'active' citizen-subject, the elementary term of the abstract state, assumes that 'we' have the interest of the institutions in mind, whereas 'they' are simply out to grab whatever they can get; that when 'we' make our claims on the resources, 'we' do so in terms of what is legitimately due to us, whereas when 'they' make their claims 'they' do so by bringing 'political'

pressure. One should, in other words, question the assumption—so deep-seated that it is never even acknowledged as an assumption which needs validation—that the framework for political discussion and action would have to be the liberal-democratic one that everyone would want to accept, if they reflected on it and if they knew what was best for the society (and, of course, for themselves). What are the implications of this position for the valuation of social meaning of goods and institutions? The state in India sought to legitimize itself in the idiom of liberal democracy, but in that process it actively delegitimized social meanings embedded in different communities; the claims of the sovereign state and its citizen-subject, in its universality, asserted itself over and against the necessarily implicit and unarticulated claims of community. If the latter resisted the hegemonic claims of the former, its own idiom, partial and fractured, was largely a translation of the discourse of the citizen-subject. Now, as I noted above, the self-legitimizing narrative of the state is in a crisis. That is to say, the state is not in a position any more to freeze the conflictual and contestatory process by mobilizing and presenting social meanings as shared and binding (surely this is one way of understanding the operation of hegemony). The appeal to social meaning cannot secure legitimacy or consensus because social meaning is what is being contested. Political conflicts arising out of radically different evaluations of social meanings and practices cannot be resolved by appealing to (shared) meanings. It is not possible to introduce, or, more accurately, impose, consensus as a legitimizing device when the terms of that consensus are being challenged, contested, and sought to be transformed.

In this context, to persist in interpreting caste politics as vote-bank politics and the reservation issue as effective or ineffective social policy is to miss the political dislocation of the social in India. It would be equally simplistic, and even more dangerous, to uphold some claims or demands as embodying an alternative idiom vindicating the community or representing the subaltern. Expressions of caste solidarity of the subaltern—to the extent they are governed by the representational logic of secular politics, to the extent, that is, caste retains its self-identity—do not in themselves lead to transformative politics.

This is where I believe we can draw from the politicization and theorization of gender in feminist theory and politics. I have been claiming that caste has been reified both in politics and in the social sciences, whereas gender, by all evidence, is becoming a critical and constitutive category in the everyday political discourse of the secular milieu. If this is too sweeping a claim, at least the political and theoretical space for it has been created by the women's movement and by feminism (why I mention these two separately will be clear in a moment).

Let me make clear how I see the analogy between gender and caste. Linda Gordon explains the relationship between feminism and women's experience in this way:

> There are traditions of female thought, women's culture, and female consciousness that are not feminist. Female and feminist consciousness stand in

> complex relation to each other: clearly they overlap, for the female is the basis of the feminist, yet the feminist arises also out of a desire to escape the female. That seems to me an inescapable tension. . . . It seems to me important to claim both. The female is ourselves, our bodies and our socially constructed experience. It is not the same as feminism, which is not a 'natural' excretion of that experience but a controversial political interpretation and struggle, by no means universal to women. (Gordon 1986: 30)

Feminism as a theory, social discourse, and political practice hopes to contribute to what Linda Gordon calls 'the socially constructed experience' of women, and contests the power relations that constitute gender identities as natural, that impose inequalities as difference. Feminism tries to come to terms with the oppressiveness of identity, of having to be a sexed being all the time. That is to say, it tries to (as Denise Riley puts it) calibrate 'the dangerous intimacy between subjectification and subjection' (Riley 1988:17).

My primary interest in that remarkable quote from Gordon lies in the way she sets up the relationship between women's experience and theory. I am suggesting that we should look at caste experience or caste practice in such a way that a caste theory will stand in the same relationship to that experience as, in Linda Gordon's conception, feminist theory stands in relation to women's experience. Such a move has many advantages: in the first place, it helps us to steer clear of sociological or anthropological reification of caste; second, we are freed from the obligation to answer the ontological question, namely, what is caste? Let me explain.

The analogy, it is important to note at the outset, is at the level of method. Feminist theorists have argued that sex or sexual difference, rather than being pre-given or natural, is itself produced by various cultural apparatuses, whose analysis is enabled by the critical concept of gender. Furthermore, by problematizing categories such as 'women', 'woman' or 'female' they have begun to question the nature of a politics that posits a preconstituted subject—'women's experience'—as the ground. An epistemology which takes the humanist subject—the citizen-subject, par excellence—as model on which to map gender identity, necessarily reifies gender identity as pre-discursive (and thus it is posited as universal, too); a politics that takes such an identity as foundational limits, from the outset, the transformative possibilities. To argue, nominalistically and constructivistically, that identities are effects, however, does not entail they are in some way unreal. As Judith Butler puts it:

> A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. To expose the contingent acts that create the appearance of a naturalistic necessity, a move which has been a part of cultural critique at least since Marx, is a task that now takes on the added burden of showing how the very notion of the subject, intelligible only

> through its appearance as gendered, admits of possibilities that have been forcibly foreclosed by the various reifications of gender that have constituted its contingent ontologies. (Butler 1990: 33)

In order to resist the reification of caste (and its simultaneous disavowal), we need to open ourselves to the elaboration a social critique based on caste identity politics, a critique that should enable the transformation of our institutions. More work needs to be done before the conceptual features and political strategies of the new theory can emerge from an interpretive engagement with the caste practices and struggles that surround us. And more, certainly, needs to be said about the role that a feminist theory, itself concerned with the problems of caste politics, can play in clarifying the as yet ill-formed conceptuality of a theory of caste practice. And it would, of course, be a challenge to feminist theory too to deconstruct the 'proper' subject of feminist politics in order to address the gendered articulations of caste practices.[7] We can, I think, productively ask if it is possible to think of caste politics as identity politics? Will it encounter problems similar to the ones encountered by feminist identity politics? Can one analogously talk about a politics which is a particular interpretation of caste experience? Caste politics (like gender politics) would be a practical critique. It would transform *itself* in transforming the relationships and institutions. For feminist theory is not about gender oppression alone; it is concerned with elaborating a politics, new ways of being, of being together. What would be the equivalent for caste politics—how dowe name this theory?

This is a revised version of my presentation at the workshop on 'Caste and Gender,' organized by Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies (Hyderabad, February 1992). Conversations with K. Satyanarayana and Srividya Natarajan helped me formulate many of the issues discussed here. R. Vaidyan and Tejaswini Niranjana offered useful comments on an earlier draft. The usual caveat applies.

NOTES

1. Balibar (1991: 53) notes that this thesis is neither Kantian nor Hegelian. For an elaboration of the argument deployed here, see Dhareshwar and Srivatsan 1993.
2. I have taken the formulation from Unger (1987: *passim*).
3. Think how hard it would be to come up with examples of caste abuse in English. I am sure though that we will soon have (if the anti-Mandal agitation has not already done so) specifically English caste abuses.
4. See Kaviraj 1990: 12. The complex logic of the mutual imbrication of and the opposition between subaltern and élite idioms is explored by Partha Chatterjee (1993).
5. I have in mind the typical scenarios that one saw during the anti-Mandal agitation in which upper-caste faculty swapped stories and anecdotes about their experience with 'SC/ST' students. I thank K. Satyanarayana for helping me see how the 'slippage' occurs.
6. I do not wish to suggest that it is voluntary. The double semiotics was in operation when the students agitating against the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report took to street-sweeping to register their protest. At another level, the intensity and the violence of the agitation (the self-immolations, especially) can be accounted for in terms of the logic of the double

semiotics. The decision by V.P. Singh seemed to threaten, by revealing it, the mechanism that had ensured the smooth reproduction of the double semiotics which had made possible the simultaneous disavowal and reification of caste. Momentarily at least it seemed as though the state itself is violently transcoding the class semiotics by caste semiotics, overturning thereby the private and the public, the hidden and the open.

7. For a stimulating discussion of this issue, see Tharu and Niranjana 1993.

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