The Baby and the Bath Water: Diversity, Deconstruction and Feminist Theory in Geography

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Abstract: This paper discusses the implications of recognizing diversity among women for feminist geography. The need to recognize and theorize differences between women poses a challenge to both feminist theory and politics based on the assumption of a unity of interests between women. The challenge to this position from three areas is outlined—from charges of ethnocentrism within feminist writing and the politics of the women’s movement, from a feminist critique of anthropology, and from the method of deconstruction in post-structuralist theory. It is argued that the recognition of difference will not weaken, but rather strengthen feminist scholarship.

Introduction

That geography needs theory goes without saying (or it should do) but the nature of theory in geography has always been a vexed question. It has often not been clear what theory or theories are appropriate, or what it/they will do. The vain search for a specifically spatial theory, uniting physical and human geography has, thankfully, been abandoned but theoretical matters remain unresolved. In the last 2 or 3 years, however, a debate about the nature of theory in human geography has surfaced in the pages of some of the major journals (in, for example, Society and Space in 1986 and 1987, in Antipode in 1987, and in Transactions in 1988). Many geographers, especially those educated during the 1960s (myself included!) seem to have entered a middle age: a period of retrospection and introspection, attempting to come to grips with new ways of seeing the world in the context of the social and political changes of the 1980s.

One of the unifying features of the rethinking has been a conscious attempt to recognize diversity and difference. Realists, deconstructionists, post-modern theorists and the ‘locality’ school have all, in various ways, built into their view of the world complexity, contingency and particularity. The responses to these attempts—in themselves different, implying adherence to a variety of theoretical positions—have been interesting, often defensive and occasionally ill humoured. We have been variously admonished to beware new orthodoxies (HARVEY, 1987) (and old ones), to eschew the dangers of an empirical turn (SMITH, 1987), or to accept challenges and respond positively to what some portray as an intellectual crisis in contemporary geographical thought (DEAR, 1988).

Feminist geography has not been exempt from the more widespread theoretical reassessment and reconsideration in human geography. In a decade of debate, feminist geographers have trodden a path from description to grand theory. Initially, work focused on the spatial behaviour of women (TIVERS, 1978), relying in the main on an untheorized duality between women and men. Later the concept of gender roles provided a useful focus for analysing differences (WOMEN AND GEOG-
More recent analyses of the social construction of gender identity, of masculinity and femininity, and of the social bases of relations of power between men and women, have entered the feminist geography literature (Bowlby et al., 1989). The underlying theoretical assumption of a great deal of this work, despite its emphasis on geographical variation, was the universality of women's oppression. Paradoxically, the definitions of key theoretical ideas and categories such as the household, the family, kin, inheritance and property were based on ethnocentric notions and a rather uncritical use of conceptual polarities or dualisms, particularly the public–private divide.

These ideas are now being challenged from several directions: by the political practice of Black women in Britain and the U.S.A., informed by their everyday lives in racist societies; by and expanding body of feminist scholarship in anthropology, development studies and geographies of the ‘Third World’, and by the academic project, from within feminism and other discourses, of deconstruction. This latter project consists of exposing the inadequacies of the central hierarchical and oppositional categories that form the core of Western intellectual thought—man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body. It is here that feminism and deconstruction meet, despite the profound incompatibility of feminist politics and deconstructionist practice.

What I want to do in this paper is attempt to assess the significance of the debates about diversity and difference for feminist geography and to argue that their recognition need not imply a rejection of theory. Rather, the understanding of diversity requires a deeper commitment to theory. It seems to me that the most urgent task is to construct a theory in a way that lets us think in terms of pluralities and diversities rather than unities and universals. Critiques of the idea of a unified identity, of oppositional categories and absolute concepts, such as equality [a central and contested term in feminist thought (Pateeman, 1988; Phillips, 1987)], should help in this task. Here the method of deconstruction is useful.

While not rejecting theory, neither should we reject the political purpose of feminism. It is here that feminism and deconstruction part company. What feminists require is a theoretical framework or set of perspectives that will enable us to act on alternative ways of thinking, challenging rather than accepting, or simply reversing, the old hierarchies of gender. For, despite certain similarities, ultimately feminist theory, and its political practice, will prove to be a challenge, rather than a complement, to deconstruction and post-modernism.

### Diversity and Difference

There are a number of different ways in which the concept of difference has become part of the debate within feminism and within feminist geography. Part of the impetus has come from changes within the women's movement, and part from an awareness of a range of debates and theoretical approaches from several academic disciplines. The three particular examples or cases that I want to discuss here are:

(i) A recognition of differences in the experiences of women, particularly women in different class positions and more recently of women of colour. The most significant debates of these issues have been held within the women's movement and in feminist journals, especially in Britain in Feminist Review.

(ii) A debate within feminist anthropology and development studies that has drawn attention to the ethnocentricity of Western concepts. Here I shall draw on Henrietta Moore's recent book Feminism and Anthropology (1988).

The parallels between the debates in examples (i) and (ii) are clear. In addition there are parallels with the work that is being undertaken under the general rubric of 'locality studies'. Within a part of human and cultural geography in general, and also in feminist geography, there has been renewed emphasis on the importance of place and locality in the construction of local consciousness and sets of social relationships. As this debate will be familiar to most readers, I shall merely draw attention to some of the similarities and implications of the emphasis in both areas on diversity and difference.

(iii) The third strand that converges upon a recognition of diversity is the debate within post-modernism about the positional rather than absolute status of meaning. Deconstruction raises questions not only about the social construction of sexual identity and gender roles but challenges the fixity of the very notion 'woman'. These notions have a great deal in common with the recognition of diversity in feminist practice although there are tensions as well as parallels between feminism and deconstruction. The latter tends to be a particularly male-dominated
discourse whose appropriation of the feminine has often reinforced rather than challenged male power.

All these strands have proved challenging to feminist theory and politics for its basis and identity lay initially on the presumption and recognition of differences between men and women. Once difference within the two categories becomes the focus a radical challenge to conventional assumptions is posed. It often seems, paradoxically, that while the diversity between women is recognized in everyday life and in politics—the women's movement in the 1980s, for example, became increasingly fragmented and disparate—in certain strands of feminist writing there has been a reassertion of the idea of 'separate spheres', of the essential unity of all women and a tendency to assert 'feminine' attributes as inherently superior. Work by authors such as Mary Daly, Andrea Dworkin, Adrienne Rich and Dale Spender falls into this category. Feminist geography has not been immune from this, in for example its search for a common basis to women's oppression. However, I shall argue here that work now being done under the broad heading of feminist geography must respond to the challenges posed by diversity and differences among women.  

**Experiential Diversity**

The idea of 'sameness', of a shared women's perspective informed, and indeed is still important for, feminist political organization around particular issues. It is also an important presumption in a great deal of the academic writing on gender relations and women's oppression. The critique of this notion of sameness or unity stems from two key debates. The first of these arose, in Britain at least, in the context of a debate among part of the left about the relationship between class and gender (BARRETT, 1987; PHILLIPS, 1987; SEGAL, 1987; WILSON and WEIR, 1985) and the priority of contending political projects. The second challenge to feminist claims to represent all women arose from a strong critique by Black women of the ethnocentrism of the women's movement in Britain and of the dominance of White, middle-class women's voices in the published collections of what passed for feminist theory in Britain (ANTHIAS and YUVAL-DAVIS, 1983; BARRETT and McINTOSH, 1985; CARBY, 1982; DAVIES, 1981; MAMA, 1984; TRIVEDI, 1984). Black feminists argued that one particular discourse, and a related set of political demands, was privileged over others. Different views of womanhood and different ways of looking at 'the woman question' were being ignored. In the U.S., too, the voices of African-American feminists became increasingly strong in the arguments about diversity and difference.

The significance of class and race as dimensions of difference among women has varied historically. In her book, *Divided Loyalties* (1987a), Anne Phillips has demonstrated how, in twentieth-century Britain, class divisions have sometimes overridden and sometimes have been overridden by communalities based on gender. Key social changes in the post-war period, and particularly during the 1980s, have affected women in different ways. PHILLIPS (1987a) argues that in contemporary Britain the large scale entry of women into waged labour has united women. Changes in working patterns have cut across class divides and what largely determines a woman's participation in the labour market is her marital status and the age of her children; 'neither class nor income make the same kind of difference' (PHILLIPS, 1987a, p. 61). The struggle to unite 'dual roles', to achieve a coincidence in space and time of the constraints imposed by combining waged labour and domestic responsibilities, is a common experience of most women in Britain today. PHILLIPS (1987a, p. 62) comments thus: "the working mother is now the norm, and as far as overall hours spent in waged employment, there is little to choose between the life of a middle-class and a working-class woman. Most women have children, most women go to work, most run their households without the help of servants. Compared with previous periods the lives of women are now amazingly homogeneous."

This statement would appear to counter the argument about experiential and material differences between women. However, as Phillips herself goes on to argue, these apparent similarities conceal significant differences. For there are immense differences between the experiences of women in waged work. The work, rewards, security and fringe benefits of the small, but expanding number of women in professional positions are vastly different from the also expanding numbers of women in the ghettos of poorly-paid, 'women only' jobs, which are often casual and part-time. The correspondence of this bipolarity between women workers with the core-periphery distinction of dual labour market theorists and the proponents of the flexible accumulation thesis is clear, although a detailed knowledge of the historical patterns of women's waged work casts doubts on how recent the division is. However, it is
clear that economic restructuring, deskilling and the privatization of many public-sector services jobs throughout the 1980s have served to sharpen the divisions between women workers. (McDowell, forthcoming). In between the two extremes are large numbers of clerical and secretarial workers whose labour and responsibilities are also being restructured, particularly through the introduction of new technology.

Racial segregation in the labour market further sharpens distinctions between women workers. The jobs that Black women typically do in Britain are not the ones in which White women are concentrated. Far fewer African-Caribbean and Asian women are employed as clerical workers, and work in proportionately higher numbers in manufacturing—in the clothing trade for Asian women and in engineering and allied trades for Black women. West Indian women, in particular, also work in large numbers in the health service. Another difference dividing women along racial lines in their hours of employment. All Black women are more likely to work full-time than are White women; among the latter group, educational achievement is the key distinguishing characteristic. Women with higher educational qualifications are most likely to work full-time (Bruegel, 1989). Phizacklea (1983) has argued that the differences between women in the labour market based in race are sufficient to justify the designation of separate 'class fractions'.

Black women have also criticized White feminists for failing to recognize differences on other grounds. It has been argued that cultural stereotypes about Black women's, and men's, sexuality, their family forms, attitudes and aspirations are reproduced in feminist writing, and also in the political demands of the women's movement. Campaigns around issues of pornography, abortion and childcare, for example, took for granted the experiences of White women and assumed that these were universal. Similarly in the cultural field, the writing, art and music of White women has been more likely to be published or performed in mainstream outlets (despite the half-serious designation of the major sources and channels as 'malestream'). Black women's writing is still more likely to be published in 'alternative' journals or books by smaller and independent presses and publishing houses.

In recognizing the differences between women, however, we must be equally careful not to set up new polar distinctions or dualisms. As Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1983) pointed out some years ago, the Black–White distinction is often unsatisfactory. Certain women fit into neither category, nor is the distinction always helpful. Differences in religion, in culture, whether women are migrants or not are all important bases of difference and of political mobilization in particular circumstances. Anthias and Yuval-Davis prefer to distinguish differences based on ethnic divisions than on race or skin colour. However, like the arguments made by Phillips about the relations between class and gender, the significance of each dimension of difference between women varies at particular moments and in particular circumstances. And, like the concept of gender, recognizing that in certain circumstances women as a group are united, the retention of the Black–White distinction remains an essential way of mapping the racism based on skin colour in Britain and other advanced industrial societies, especially the U.S.A. There is convincing evidence from both societies that colour is the basis of discrimination, notwithstanding the complexities of ethnic bases for division and discrimination.

While these arguments will not come as a surprise to most geographers, alert as they have become in recent years to divisions based on class, race and ethnicity and on gender, what is less commonly appreciated is that these divisions are not additive. It has become common to talk about the threefold or triple oppression of Black women in capitalist, racist and patriarchal societies, as if each dimension of power and domination were separate layers, superimposed one on another. But racial and ethnic differences are not a variation on the basic theme of gender—rather the experience of race transforms the experience of gender. Just as in the past we have pointed out the inadequacies of adding in gender as another variable in conventional analyses of geographical problems, neither can the experiences of Black women simply be incorporated into feminist analyses by adding in the differences between, say, West Indian and Asian women. Herein lies the contradiction at the heart of feminist politics and theorizing: how to deal with the contradictory bases of divisions between women. Black and White women may have interests in common with each other but they also have interests that cut across these common ones. The same point is valid for divisions based on class position. Ramazanoglu (1986, p. 85) believes that the differences preclude common organization except in specific instances: "The politics of black feminism cannot be the same as the politics of white feminism except in specific struggles... It is these differences and common points that need to be
A major critique of the ethnocentrism of some of the key concepts and assumptions of feminist scholarship in Britain and North America has come from recent work by feminist anthropologists. The relationship between feminism and anthropology has been a reciprocal and complex one. Feminists have used anthropological data both to deconstruct essentialist arguments about women in Western culture and in their work on the relationship between gender divisions of labour and the mode of production. At the same time, feminist anthropologists have challenged many of the common assumptions found within their own discipline about femininity and gender relations. Too often (male) anthropologists have transferred their own culturally specific notions about gender to other societies. There has also been a fierce debate within British anthropology about the heritage of its colonial past. Black anthropologists and Black feminists have documented the racist assumptions in anthropological writing and theorizing in a debate which has a great deal in common with the critique of racism in feminist work [see, for example, AMOS and PARMER (1984) and BHAVANANI and COULSON (1986)]. Unlike geography in the past, women were not excluded from anthropology because of the traditional concern of the discipline with family, kinship and marriage. Ethnographic accounts of the economic and social behaviour of women, of rite and ritual are common. The main problem is not one of exclusion but rather one of representation.

In her recent book, MOORE (1988) argues that the initial problem of representation was located, by feminist anthropologists, in male bias. This bias has three layers or tiers. First, male anthropologists are equipped with a set of assumptions about the significance of men and women in society, and so tend to place greater reliance on information from men. Second, there are biases inherent in the society being studied. The view that women are subordinate is often communicated to the researcher. Third, the biases inherent in Western culture filter the interpretation of asymmetries in other societies. Too frequently they are assumed to be analogous to the unequal and hierarchical relations in Western society. Here a first step in correcting the bias has been to build up data on women and women's activities, a step analogous to feminist work on the geography of non-Western societies (MOMSEN and TOWNSEND, 1987). But in anthropology, as in geography, it became clear that "the real problem about incorporating women . . . lies not at the level of empirical research but at the theoretical and analytical level" (MOORE, 1988, p. 2). In common with other branches of feminist scholarship the 'add women and stir' method was quickly discarded as inadequate by feminist anthropologists.

The common project of feminist anthropology, development studies and geography is undeniable. Indeed, MOORE's (1988, p. 12) definition of feminist anthropology as being concerned with "what it is to be a woman, how cultural understandings of the category 'woman' vary through space and time, and how these understandings relate to the position of women in different societies" could hardly be improved on as a definition of the feminist geographical project. But whereas the strength of feminist geography so far has lain in its documentation of regional differences in patterns of the division of labour by gender, feminist anthropology has tended towards a more self-conscious interrogation and deconstruction of the very category 'woman' and the associated oppositional attributes of femininity and masculinity. In anthropology there has been a deeper concern with gender symbols and gender stereotypes, with the cultural construction of 'woman' as well as with social relationships between women and men. However, these areas of concern are now on the geographical agenda too.

In her summary of anthropological work on the cultural construction of gender, MOORE (1988) demonstrates that, despite the enormous observable variation in futural understandings of what the categories 'men' and 'women; mean, certain notions about gender are common to a wide range of societies. Key dualisms or dichotomies are commonly used to distinguish and order gender differences in which the nature culture and domestic private pairs are predominant. However, the meaning and the associated characteristics of each side of the dualisms are culturally specific. For example, the particular view of the 'domestic' and 'public' spheres of life common in contemporary Western societies, and in feminist
theory, and the assumptions about mothering and the family on which it is based cannot be considered universal. Domestic units may not necessarily be built around biological mothers and their children nor is the concept of 'mother' necessarily constructed through maternal love, daily childcare or physical proximity. Similarly, feminists have challenged the widespread tendency in the social sciences to focus on the household as a unit of analysis. It is too often assumed that household relations are based on pooling resources, rather than investigating the specific pattern of the control and allocation of resources in relation to particular sets of rights and obligations. Indeed, the very conceptualization of households as units may be incorrect. It privileges conjugal relations between the genders over other types of relations and sets of obligations. Research in the Caribbean and among African-Americans in North American cities (STACK, 1974), for example, has highlighted the inadequacy of taking the household as a unit of analysis. The idea of a domestic network spread over several households, which may not be but often is kin-based, has been developed. The assumption that the home is a key site of male power over women has to be re-evaluated.

These ideas, about mothering and domestic relations, which are hardly discussed at all in the geography of development literature, challenge the preconceptions with which many scholars in our discipline approach their analysis of other societies, and indeed of British society. One of the key lessons that we can learn from anthropology is that comparative work, both between and within societies, has an essential part to play in the deconstruction of the universal category 'woman', the acquisition of knowledge about the cultural and historical specificity of the images, attributes, activities and appropriate behaviour associated with women. Moore's survey of a wide range of anthropological studies amply demonstrates that the ways in which biological differences between men and women are socially and culturally determined are extremely various. As she points out in her introduction "the concept 'woman' cannot stand as an analytical category in anthropological inquiry, and consequently there can be no analytical meaning in such concepts as the 'position of women', the subordination of women' and 'male dominance' when applied universally" (p. 7).

Some of the most interesting work being undertaken by feminist anthropologists, and in development studies is research into the links between women's status, the gender division of labour, forms of marriage and inheritance and social relations of production. There is a considerable anthropological literature, written from both a Marxist and a non-Marxist perspective [see, for example, the key early texts by BOSERUP (1970), GOODY (1976) and MEILLASSOUX (1981)] about the relations between types of production and gender relations, a great deal of it centred around the effects of industrial capitalism on gender relations. In the predominant Marxist literature there has been a long debate about the exact relationship between production and reproduction, often carried on at a high level of abstraction. More interesting work has explored the variety and specificity of interrelationship.

Although feminist and other geographers were not slow to recognize the links between women's position in the family, their role in reproduction and their entry into particular types of waged labour, their analysis often fails to recognize the diversity of this relationship, relying on relatively untheorized concepts such as 'green labour' (MASSEY, 1984). Detailed anthropological studies and analyses of the development process have demonstrated the complexity of the ways in which a labour force is constituted in specific circumstances. Not all women are available to enter the labour force at a particular time, nor are all categories of women regarded as equally interchangeable. Certain categories of women may be prevented from entering waged work altogether; others may find themselves removed from it. In recent industrialization in the Caribbean, for example, older women, who have often completed the child-rearing stage of their domestic careers, are preferred to young women. On the other hand in the Far East, adolescent girls, often hired on the condition that they live in employer-provided accommodation, sometimes in compounds, are the preferred female labour force (MITTER, 1986; PEARSON, 1986a, b).

'Familial' relations and culturally-specific attributes of femininity shape women's availability for and access to waged labour as well as playing a key role in producing and maintaining gender ideologies. The kind of tasks assigned to women in particular societies at different junctures of capital accumulation play a significant part in the designation and allocation of productive roles. Thus, the capitalist transformation of the developing world is uneven over space and time as indigenous social formations have a determining influence on the ways in which existing production systems are transformed. Women are drawn into waged labour in a variety of ways that may reflect, reinforce or challenge existing gender relations and
specific kinship and inheritance systems. Women are variously drawn into waged work as homeworkers, domestic servants, as permanent or casual waged labourers outside the home, or into petty commodity production or petty commerce in the informal sector.

It might be argued that anthropologists, and indeed geographers, have always recognized difference. Indeed, the explanation of cultural and spatial differences, respectively, are the raison d'être of the discipline. In geography, for example, the ways in which economic organization, urban forms, migration behaviour and more lately gender relations are organized and vary over space have been studied. But the theoretical relationship that is assumed between the differences in most work needs reversing. We need to ask not only how gender relations are experienced and structured over space, but also how the social and the spatial organization of economic and domestic life is experienced through gender. The aim of this reversal coincides in part with what is known as the 'locality' approach, derived from the ideas of MASSEY (1984) about the interrelationship between uniqueness and interdependence, or particularity and the general. The current debates in regional and human geography in Britain and the U.S.A. about the relationships between territory, production and work (SCOTT and STORPER, 1986) and the power of geography (WOLCH and DEAR, 1989) have a great deal in common with the debates within feminism about diversity and difference. In the mainstream geographical debates, however, the debate is on how territory, rather than gender, shapes economic and social life. This is in part because the predominant focus of work within the locality perspective is on the relations of production and the economic transformation of particular areas as local labour markets (COOKE, 1986; MURGATROYD et al., 1985). The interrelationship between women's employment and domestic situations is thus ignored or simply assumed (FOORD et al., 1986; WALBY, 1986). In part it is also because of the tendency by geographers to treat women as an unproblematic category and to ignore the divisions along class, race and ethnic lines, although recent work by FINCHER (1989) in Melbourne and by ROSE (1989) in Montreal is alert to the importance of class differences between women.

Deconstruction, Feminism and Geography

The third challenge to notions of an essential unity between women arises from post-structuralist theory. The relationship between feminism and deconstruction is a complex one. In some ways both areas have developed parallel lines of thought—in their challenge to fixed oppositional categories, in their critique of the construction of masculinity as a unity in which internal differences are projected onto an inferior 'other', and in notions of the construction of masculinity as a unity in which internal differences are projected onto an inferior 'other', and in notions of non-unified, decentralized methods of organization, although feminism, unlike deconstruction, is informed by a political purpose.

In an interesting essay in Feminist Studies, Joan Scott (1988) has suggested that four particular concepts—language, discourse, difference and deconstruction—have been usefully appropriated by feminists from post-structuralist theory. Although I would suggest that the relationship is one of greater reciprocity than SCOTT (1988) allows, it is worth drawing out the links between her arguments and geographical appropriation of these concepts. DEAR (1988) has suggested in a different context that geographers might profitably begin to look at post-modern theory. Other geographers have embraced post-modernism with varying degrees of enthusiasm [for example, COOKE (1989), GRAHAM (1988), GREGORY (1989), HARVEY (1989) and SOJA (1989)] although BONDI (1990) currently stands alone in examining the links between feminist geography and post-modernism.

Language

Post-structuralists argue that language—words and text—has no fixed or intrinsic meaning. There is no single, self-evident relationship between language and the world. Language is a system through which meaning is constructed and cultural practices are organized. We need to ask a series of questions about how meaning is acquired and changes, and what this acquisition tells us about social relations, especially how power is constituted and operates. Work within feminist linguistics and anthropology about the making of meaning has clear parallels with post-structuralist analyses. And, although SCOTT (1988) did not draw this comparison, similar issues are beginning to be addressed by geographers in the context of debates about the meaning of landscape and the constructions of local cultures. Indeed SCOTT (1988, p. 35) actually poses the common question of feminists and post-structuralists in what we might consider to be geographical terms: "how, in what specific contexts, among which specific communities of people and by what textual and social processes has meaning been acquired". If the emphasis were
changed from meaning to social processes, we might also have a reasonably accurate definition of the aim of locality studies.

**Discourse**

The second thread that is common to both feminist analysis and post-structuralism falls under the heading of ‘discourse’. Post-structuralist theorists, influenced in particular by FOUCAULT (1980), have challenged the ideas of scientific knowledge, faith in universal reason inherited from Enlightenment philosophy, and the notion of rationality, in ways that are similar to feminist critiques of the masculine bias in the association of knowledge with scientific ‘truth’, and scientific methods of inquiry (DI STEFANO, 1990; HARDING and HINTIKKA, 1983; HARDING, 1990). Both areas of work argue that the power to control meaning and to define knowledge rests not only in writing but in the sets of organizations and institutions that control the dissemination of knowledge.

FOUCAULT (1980) has also shown how different disciplinary discourses share a set of common ‘truths’ that are assumed to be either self-evident or discernible through scientific inquiry. Biological ideas about sexual difference fall into this category. Challenges to these shared fundamental assumptions often have either been marginalized or subsumed into the very framework they sought to challenge. Foucault’s concept of resistance to power, however, and his proposal for a social criticism that is *ad hoc*, multiple and contextual rather than a recognition of the need for a *transformation* project has been criticized by some feminists: a critique with which I agree [see, for example, HARSTOCK (1990)].

**Deconstruction**

The fourth concept and the most important step in dismantling dualisms and uncovering the nature of power relations in established categories of meaning and knowledge is referred to as deconstruction. Deconstruction consists of two steps—first the reversal and then the displacement of dualisms. ‘This double process reveals the interdependence of seemingly dichotomous terms and their meaning relative to a particular history. It shows them to be not natural but constructed oppositions, constructed for particular purposes in particular contexts’ (SCOTT, 1988, pp. 37–38). Within feminism, work from a broadly deconstructionist perspective has subjected the categories of man and woman to critical scrutiny, showing not only how apparently fixed and normative categories are used to organize cultural understandings of sexual difference, but also how these categories themselves are defined in particular contexts for particular purposes and are open to change (FLAX, 1990; ORTNER and WHITEHEAD, 1981).

An insistence on difference and the construction of categories in specified contexts has been important in the move towards recognizing diversity among women. In our research, we must begin with the questions about how gender attributes are constructed and used in different ways and in particular contexts rather than taking ‘women’ as a self-evident category of analysis. SCOTT (1988) argues, for example, that the history of women’s participation in the labour market, the creation of a gendered labour force and the association between skill designations and gender needs re-telling in the light of deconstructionist methods. A large body of work now exists in sociology, economics and to a lesser extent in geography that has revealed how supposedly natural attributes of women (be they docility, dexterity or ‘caring’) have been set up in opposition to male attributes to organize and reorganize work processes and differentially reward workers on the basis of gender (COCKBURN, 1983, 1985; PHILLIPS and TAYLOR, 1980; JENSON, 1989). But, as SCOTT (1988, p. 47) argues, “if we write the history of women’s
work by gathering data that describes the activities, needs, interests and culture of ‘women workers’, we leave in place the naturalized contrast and reify a fixed categorical difference between women and men. We start the story, in other words, too late, by uncritically accepting a gendered category (the ‘woman worker’) that itself needs investigation because its meaning is relative to its history. And, of course, relative to its geography; gender attributes are also place-specific (McDowell and Massey, 1984).

Implications for Feminist Theory and Politics

The parallels between feminism and the method of deconstruction are, however, limited. The need for feminists to take account of diversity is not a plea for an atheoretical pluralism, for the substitution of multiple categories for binary oppositions. Here feminism and post-structuralism part company. For the purpose of my argument here is to suggest that we need theoretical frameworks that enable us to deal with the diversity and differences among women.

Gender, both as a symbol and as a set of social relations between women and men, is defined and experienced through the specific mediations of time, place, sexual preference, class, race, colonialism and imperialism. There is no uniformity or sameness and the sets of meanings and structures that result in women’s subordination have to be specified in each instance. This recognition should enable us to move to a set of theoretical propositions that specify the interrelationships between, for example, class, gender and cultural differences in which it is accepted that each form of difference is structurally simultaneous, although the significance of each may vary in particular circumstances. A comparative perspective is an essential element in this work, in, for example, the re-evaluation of some of the current assumptions in geography about the impact of capitalist penetration and the relationship between family forms, gender relations and capitalist relations of production. For women are divided by race and class and their positions as domestic workers, as housewives under capitalism are not the same, just as the processes of class formation are gender-specific because women enter into wage relations in a different way from men.

The recognition of complexity and specificity by feminists also has implications for feminist politics. The aim is not to avoid taking positions but to build a form of political organization that recognizes the multiple positions women occupy and at the same time has its origins in the struggles against the ways in which women have been and are oppressed. Unlike postmodernists, who have no tools for analysing specificity or for taking yes/no positions, feminists emphasize not the arbitrary nature of the ‘real’ and the impossibility of judging between alternatives, but the significance of understanding and struggling against the collective, but not uniform, oppression of women. The critique from Black feminists has taught those of us who are White not to speak for each other, but to speak with a united political voice that recognizes, and draws strength from, internal differences.

Notes

1. A little history is needed to locate this paper. It was originally written at the beginning of 1989, partly in response to my growing dissatisfaction with the way in which feminist geographers, myself included, were using the term ‘women’ in an undifferentiated way to include women of different ages, classes, sexual preferences and, most importantly, ethnicities, without distinguishing the important differences between them. This dissatisfaction crystallized at the annual conference of the IBG in January 1989 when the Women and Geography Group organized a session on race, racism and gender. This paper, developing my thoughts on differences between women, was commissioned for a special issue of Geoforum on gender. That issue has taken an exceptionally long time to appear for reasons that are not clear to me. However, in the months, and now years, since I wrote it, I have given various versions of this paper and it has been quite widely circulated, both in Britain and in the U.S.A., among those interested in feminism and, more lately, post-modernism. I was encouraged by comments from those who read it to allow it to appear despite the time lag and, inevitably, moves forward in the debate to which it contributes.

Re-reading this paper at the end of 1990, with a view to revision, I was struck by the confidence of my initial assertion of the need for theory—in the intervening months the influence of post-modernism in our discipline has strengthened and old theoretical certainties have been subjected to a stronger challenge. However, I decided to leave this paper as it stands apart from some small additions to the final section on feminism and post-modernism. This paper thus reflects a longer period of theoretical reassessment than I had originally intended but it still appears to me to be a timely contribution to contemporary debates.

2. There are, of course, several feminisms, just as there are several post-modernisms. It should be made clear from the examples which I give, but for those unable to ‘read’ my text, my own theoretical position is a variant of socialist-feminism that is sensitive to the specificities of particular cultural and historical contexts in analysing
women's subordination. For a discussion of the differences between feminist geographers see Women and Geography Newsletter, Autumn 1990, available from Jan Penrose, University of Edinburgh. The 'multiple voices' of feminism, however, differ from multiple postmodernisms. As STRATHERN (1987, p. 28) has argued "Feminists argue with one another because they also know themselves as an interest group."

References


