Debates

FEMINISM, POSTMODERNISM, AND GEOGRAPHY: SPACE FOR WOMEN?

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According to its proponents, postmodernism seeks to recover that which existing cultural forms, social theories and epistemologies have excluded. 'Space' is numbered among those exclusions and geographers have noted that postmodernism appears to sensitise diverse traditions in social thought to geographical difference (Gregory, 1989). The reality behind that appearance is disputed, hence responses to postmodernism that vary from the enthusiastic (Cooke, 1989) through guarded excitement (Graham, 1988) to hostility (Harvey, 1987) shading into derision (Lovering, 1989). But what is notable is that the same issues and perspectives remain marginal: women, ethnic minorities and collected 'others' get tagged along as categories to be 'recovered', with or without the benefit of postmodernism. The possibility that we might be 'in there' already, that alternative perspectives on the dichotomy between 'self' and 'other' already exist, goes unnoticed (cf. Morris, 1988, pp. 11-16). In particular, the transformative potential of feminism is simply ignored; it remains outside 'the project' of radical geography as well as mainstream geography (Christopherson, 1989), as continued silence about the vigorous debate between feminism and postmodernism testifies.

This paper challenges such silence. In the first section I outline geographical discussions of postmodernism arguing that, whether critical or celebratory, these are characterised by a premature foreclosure of key issues raised, or at least highlighted, by postmodernism. Thus, postmodernism is debated, or in some cases assimilated, within existing theoretical frameworks in ways that resist any fundamental challenge to existing 'radical' geography. Secondly, I consider how feminists might respond to these discussions of postmodernism, and in so doing comment on the significance of postmodernism for feminist geography. In this section my comments focus on the gender coding of knowledge and on the question of difference.

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Postmodernism: geographical encounters

Whereas poststructuralism insists on the instability of meanings, postmodernism exploits such instability, widening the gap between signifier and signified until images are liberated from any constant points of reference. Consequently, postmodernism defies definition and slips out in the myriad of spaces (absences) of my preceding sentence. But postmodernism leaves a trace, and I consider three elements of this trace, concerned with architectural style, cultural change and social theory respectively, that are apparent in geographical writings.

Postmodernism as architectural style provoked attention in the context of interpretations of the built environment (Dear, 1986; Knox, 1987). It has sometimes been welcomed as a humanising of the environment, in which value is attached to a human scale, to personal associations and to local histories (e.g. Ley, 1987). Others have been critical, interpreting it merely as another, more frenetic, phase of consumerism, commodification and profit-making (e.g. Harvey, 1987). Characterised by multiple allusions, juxtaposition and, above all, double codings, such different readings are of course intrinsic to postmodernism. But, more important for my argument is that, in different ways, these commentators interpret postmodernism as a cultural landscape, associated with a new urban middle-class. Analyses explore tensions within both postmodernism and the new class, drawing out, for example, both the oppositional potential of critiques of modernist styles and the self-satisfied, celebratory ransacking and packaging of history to provide heritage (e.g. Mills, 1988; cf. Hutcheon, 1989). In this way, postmodernism is related to complex changes in the social order, and especially to reconfigurations of middle-class identity (see Dickens, 1989).

At this point the notion of postmodernism as architectural style converges with a broader notion of postmodernism as a 'sea change' in cultural experience and representation, or as a 'profound shift in the structure of feeling'. In this context, the key contribution of geographers has been to explore such claims in terms of the experiences and representation of time and space, and is best represented by David Harvey's account The Condition of Postmodernity. Developing Jameson's analysis of 'hyperspace', and recuperating earlier existential accounts of place and placelessness (e.g. Relph, 1976), Harvey (1989) offers an interpretation of four phases of cultural transformation in terms of what he calls 'time-space compression'. This phrase firmly roots his discussion in an historical-materialist analysis, in which postmodernism is essentially a manifestation of the transition from Fordism to flexible modes of accumulation. Extending his earlier analysis of the historical geography of capitalism, Harvey argues that crises of overaccumulation induce a
search for spatial and temporal resolutions that create an overwhelming and disruptive sense of time-space compression. The current phase began in the late 1960s/early 1970s and prompted a series of responses that transform our sense of space and time through, for example, (a) the virtual collapse of spatial barriers as new technological and organisational forms permit the almost instantaneous transfer of information and capital around the world, and (b) the adoption of a wide variety of means of reducing turnover time from the switch to 'just-in-time' systems to the commodification of ephemeral images. Consequences include the fragmentation of time into 'a series of perpetual presents', and increased sensitivity to small spatial variations. For Harvey, the cultural shifts that follow from this involve attempts to resist, explain and represent the sense of time-space compression. The transformations effected in this way illustrate that space, place and scale are social constructs not external givens. Thus

not only is the fragility and transitoriness of contemporary social relations expressed 'in space', the production of space increasingly constructs social difference (Smith, 1989, p. 12).

Hence, time-space compression generates crises in representation as well as in experience.

Harvey's interpretation of postmodernism entails a two-fold claim about spatiality. First, in his dissection of modernity from the Enlightenment to the late twentieth century, he is unravelling ideas about time and space as inseparable albeit geographically and historically varying. He is not claiming the primacy of either space or time. Rather, his discussion of modernism stresses tensions between the immutable and the transient, an associated heightened awareness of time and a concomitant subduing of space. Consequently space is taken for granted; it is treated as 'natural' rather than socially created. Secondly, in his discussion of postmodernity, Harvey is arguing that this phase of time-space compression is greatly heightening awareness of, and is in effect 'de-naturalizing', geographical space. This heightened awareness is itself manifest within discourse on postmodernism and has led some geographers to talk of a 'reassertion of space within social theory' (see Cooke, 1989; Gregory, 1989; and especially Soja, 1989).

This brings me to the third strand, within which postmodernism is interpreted as a critique of the primacy accorded to time and history in social theory, and as expressing the recuperation of geography and spatiality. Inspiration is taken from an apparent geographical turn in the work of social and cultural theorists such as Foucault and Berger. This involves both recognition of past refusals to consider the potentialities of
space, and forceful declarations of its current ascendancy, as the following citations exemplify.

Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time on the contrary was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic. (Foucault, 1980, cited by Soja, 1989, p. 10)

The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. (Foucault, 1986, cited by Soja, 1989, p. 10)

Prophesy now involves a geographical rather than historical projection; it is space not time that hides consequences from us. (Berger, 1974, cited by Soja, 1989, p. 22)

This emphasis on space has prompted a geographical recasting of the postmodern critique of meta-narratives and grand theory such that the source of totalizing tendencies in major bodies of social theory is traced to the unidimensionality and the unidirectionality of time. Space, by contrast encourages a shift away from universals, and greater sensitivity to difference, local discourses etc. Spatialising tendencies are therefore considered to be intrinsic to theoretical developments influenced by postmodernism. For geography, the claim is that what began as a tentative rapprochment with social theory has now gathered pace and promises a place at the heart of social theory. For some, this analysis is celebratory of both geography and postmodernism, and involves a reinterpretation of geographical research projects (embarked upon under different banners) as archetypal postmodern enterprises (Cooke, 1989). Others warn against the naive appropriation of spatial concepts, cautioning that celebration of geographical difference merely obscures relations of power, inequality and hierarchy (Smith, 1989).

These strands in the encounter between geography and postmodernism are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. They serve to illustrate that postmodernism is difficult to limit: one can begin with a view of postmodernism as a relatively well-defined architectural style but consideration of its meaning and significance lead to broader questions about cultural experience and intellectual practice. Yet, in some ways, I think the geographical encounter with postmodernism displays a remarkable degree of containment. At one level, the response of geographers to postmodernism has been predictable and no different
from responses to other intellectual innovations, namely to insist that the spatial and environmental context of social life be taken seriously. Thus, existing interest within human geography in the representation of social relations in the spaces we create and inhabit, and in the social consequences of those creations, has been extended rather than transformed. Further, to use a currently favoured metaphor, most geographers seem keen to 'ground' postmodernism by tying it to some kind of material social 'reality', thereby refusing the more radical claims that no 'reality' is material and that there is no basis upon which to choose between competing and free-floating images. I am not wholly averse to such attempts but I think they are undertaken prematurely. Reading geographical writings on postmodernism, I repeatedly have the feeling that the real import of cultural and intellectual developments is being evacuated in a rush to ensure containment within existing categories. Nowhere is this more apparent than in relation to feminism and gender issues.

Postmodernism and geography: space for women?

Although feminism has never achieved a high profile in geography, awareness of gender issues has increased over the last decade. The most blatant forms of linguistic sexism are disappearing as academic journals and publishers issue new guidelines encouraging the use of gender-neutral language. However, it seems to me that what amounts to a polite sanitisation of language is serving to obscure important issues. For example, the phrase 'master-narrative' is conspicuous by its absence in geographical discussions of postmodernism (see Owens, 1983). My suspicion is that careful avoidance of obviously gendered language is in practice a new strategy for avoiding to think about the importance of gender in intellectual practice. And in other ways, discussions of postmodernism reveal more familiar strategies of avoidance. The illustrations included in David Harvey's discussion of postmodern culture (pp. 39 et seq.) consist entirely of images of women and yet this goes unmentioned in his commentary. Slightly more subtly, both Harvey (1989) and Soja (1989) claim that historical materialism can and should 'recuperate' issues of race and gender, but no attempt is made to do so, and in any case the ultimate superiority of class politics is unambiguously reasserted in both accounts (see for example, Harvey, 1989, pp. 353 et seq.). Similarly, discussions of postmodernism as expressive of reconfigurations of middle-class identity ignore the centrality of gender differentiation and inequality in class relations (cf. Phillips, 1987; Johnson, 1989; Walby, 1989).

What these and numerous other examples add up to is a refusal to
open up the symbolic categories Woman/Man, or the sociological categories women/men, to scrutiny. In this there is little difference between postmodernism and other subjects on which geographers have written. But, since the claim that postmodernism is an intrinsically geographical project has counterparts in some feminist responses to postmodernism, geographers might do well to consider the ramifications of selective deafness. Further, if feminists are to do more than recycle existing critiques, the relationship between feminism and postmodernism must be explored.

**Gender and space**

Postmodernism is claimed by some to be symptomatic of feminist interventions in cultural and intellectual practice. For example, feminism has been highly critical of claims to universality in philosophy and political theory, on the grounds that they are rooted in a culturally specific conception of the individual as a masculine subject (Griffiths and Whitford, 1988; Pateman, 1988). Feminism can, therefore, be viewed as a particular version, and perhaps an instigator, of the postmodern attack on discourses that claim privileged access to truth. Conversely postmodernism would appear to endorse and broaden the basis of feminist critiques of patriarchal discourse, leading Flax (1987) to claim that feminism is a 'type of postmodern philosophy' (see also Weedon, 1987). To elaborate, postmodernism diagnoses a crisis in the authority of Western intellectual thought and culture, and responds by attempting to recover and recuperate that which the associated meta-narratives exclude. According to Alice Jardine (1985, p. 25)

> such thinking has involved above all, a reincorporation and reconceptualization of that which has been the master narratives' own 'nonknowledge', what has eluded them, what has engulfed them. This other-than-themselves is almost always a 'space' of some kind (over which the narrative has lost control), and this space has been coded as feminine, as woman.

This is crucial for geography because the coding of knowledge/nonknowledge or representable/unrepresentable as masculine/feminine is closely entwined with issues of time and space. The 'other' in Jardine's statement is represented as a space. Although used metaphorically, it is precisely this widespread appeal to spatial metaphors that has so excited geographers. After all, if everyone is now 'thinking spatially', what was once a private geographical obsession is rapidly gaining converts and
surely, as Harvey argues, attempts to represent contemporary experiences are not entirely unrelated to their material context. Moreover, ‘otherness’ is not just conceived of as a different space or another country; it stands in opposition to time. It represents the polymorphous, the multi-dimensional, as opposed to the linear, the singular, the unidirectional. Harvey, Jardine and many others link together time and becoming on the one hand, space and being on the other. What the geographers then fail to do is consider the coding of the former as masculine and the latter as feminine. Some, to be fair, recognise the systematic silencing of collected ‘others’, including women, gays and blacks, within modernist intellectual practice, and suggest that postmodernism entails a shift from the masculine to the androgynous. But associations between femininity and both space and being remain studiously ignored. Thus, Michael Dear (1986, p. 367) quotes Jencks’s assertion that ‘[d]efining our world today as Post-Modern is rather like defining women as non-men’ and, like Jencks, appears to intend no irony: both seem to be saying ‘I’m not so sexist as to consider women as negatives’ while politely ignoring the sexism that enabled Western philosophy to do precisely that, i.e. to define women as non-men, as other, as unknowable. Alongside this polite avoidance, I am tempted to wonder whether the association between femininity and space might be just a bit too threatening: male geographers might be faced with deeply unsettling thoughts about their own predilections.

One possibility for feminist geographers might therefore be simply to insist on the relevance of this coding, step up the challenge to our male colleagues, and, in effect, recover geography for ourselves. This response, however, would seem to me to take neither postmodernism nor feminism far enough. Postmodernism, after all promises to dissolve, to go beyond, these dichotomies. It celebrates their instabilities and the possibility of playing with reversals and recodings. Anarchy is supposed to supersede familiar hierarchies based on fixed categories, leading, at least in some interpretations, to the polarisation between femininity and masculinity dissolving into androgyny. But, at this point, feminism and postmodernism are, surely, deeply in conflict. Whatever the instabilities of feminine and masculine codings, a feminist analysis insists that gender relations and gender hierarchies cannot just, playfully, be wished away (cf. Fraser and Nicholson, 1988). What postmodernism appears to do is to elide rather than deconstruct a dichotomy between ideas and materiality. Postmodernism may recognise the masculine bias of Western intellectual traditions, but it is accompanied by a preoccupation with gender symbolism at the expense of ‘flesh and blood’ women and men. In other words, the masculinity of ideas within these traditions is divorced from the maleness of their progenitors. This separation is carried over into postmodernism in an appropriation of the
feminine that is as untarnished by ‘real women’ as the gender-neutral language of much contemporary human geography. Hence the refusal to acknowledge that gender difference is about systematic inequalities as well as different discourses; that it is about power and politics. This refusal leads Suzanne Moore (1988, p. 167) to characterise the postmodern venture as a ‘new kind of gender tourism, whereby male theorists are able to take package trips into the world of femininity’, in which they ‘get a bit of the other’ in the knowledge that they have return tickets to the safe, familiar and, above all, empowering terrain of masculinity.

For feminist geographers, therefore, it is important to maintain a distinction between the coding of space as feminine and the existence of women in geographical space. While the former suggests a convergence between feminism and postmodernism, the latter suggests divergence. Further, whereas gender symbolism entails a dichotomy, the notion of ‘real women’ introduces more complex forms of differentiation. To take this encounter further, it is necessary to consider concepts of difference employed by feminism and postmodernism.

**Feminism and difference**

The gender codings so far discussed invoke what Michèle Barrett terms a ‘positional’ concept of difference. This concept has, in a sense, relativised meaning and therefore made it possible to criticize and deconstruct the ‘unified subject’, whose appearance of universality disguised a constitution structured specifically around the subjectivity characteristic of the white, bourgeois male (Barrett, 1987, p. 35).

Hence the convergence between postmodernism and feminism. But, postmodernism is radically anti-foundational and anti-essentialist, so that positional difference proliferates into a fragmentation of the subject and a differentiation between subjects so total that its effects are indistinguishable from the coherent, unified, stable conception of the subject it opposes. Thus,

[for the liberal, race, class and gender are ultimately irrelevant to questions of justice and truth because ‘underneath we are all the same’. For the post-structuralist [and postmodernist], race, class and gender are constructs and, therefore, incapable of decisively validating conceptions of justice and truth because underneath there lies no natural core to build...
on or liberate or maximize. Hence, once again, underneath we are all the same. (Alcoff, 1988, pp. 420-1)

Feminism necessarily resists such a paralysing conception of difference, with its reactionary implications of 'post-feminism'. One response, associated with radical feminism, is to invoke a unified female subject as an alternative to the male subject of Enlightenment rationality. But here feminism comes into conflict not only with the anti-essentialism and de-centred subject of postmodernism but also with experiential, cultural and power-laden differences among women.

How to grapple with these differences has been a central issue for feminists in recent years and is beginning to be identified as a key theoretical issue among feminist geographers (McDowell, 1990). Socialist-feminist attempts to negotiate between class and gender differences have been extended within geography in the context of spatial variations in the impact and evolution of cultural and economic conditions (Bowlby, Lewis, McDowell and Foord, 1989). These formulations attempt to break down monolithic categories of masculinity and femininity, and to explore different constructions associated with different places and class positions. This kind of approach constructs differentiated human subjects from the 'outside', as occupants of positions in a kind of dynamic, multidimensional grid. It is an approach far removed from postmodernism in that it retains a commitment to the meta-narrative, albeit informed by positions understood to be other than universal. Thus, it insists on the authenticity of the experience of oppressed groups, although also, and in some ways contradictorily, accepting that experience and identity are socially constructed and capable of being transformed. But it implies that transformation proceeds from the outside in rather than the inside out.

Elsewhere feminists have drawn on poststructuralism to explore the construction of differentiated human subjects from the inside, especially via language, while refusing to wholly relativize the concept of gender (Weedon, 1987; Alcoff, 1988; Poovey, 1988; Scott, 1988). This entails retaining a notion of power relations. I read these accounts as negotiating a knife-edge between positional and experiential concepts of difference, as exploring the relationship between gender as a symbolic construct and gender as a set of social relations, and as attempting to reconcile femininity as a condition and as a process. Thus, feminist poststructuralists accept that women are caught within patriarchal definitions of femininity, and that the binary opposition of 'men' and 'women' is a patriarchal construct. There is, therefore, no 'essential femininity' on which to base a feminist resistance. Rather, feminism must challenge the appeal to essentialism that underpins women's oppression in its 'endless variety and monotonous similarity' (Rubin, 1975, cited by Fraser
and Nicholson, 1988, p. 383). In so doing, what unites women (falsely) will be undermined so that 'in the long run . . . feminists will need to write not only the history of women's oppression but also the future of gender difference(s)' (Poovey, 1988, p. 63). And, with or without postmodern spatial metaphors, that future is as geographical as its antecedents.

Feminist poststructuralism offers a more far-reaching critique of postmodernity in which convergences and divergences are again apparent. Hutcheon (1989, p. 11) characterises postmodernism as 'complicity and critique . . . that at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth century Western world.' Despite its critique of patriarchal discourse, postmodernism remains complicit in patriarchal practice. Feminism also inscribes and subverts: it struggles to move beyond the parameters of patriarchal practice but necessarily draws on resources bequeathed by patriarchy. But, whereas the radical relativism of postmodernism leads to political paralysis, the increasing sensitivity to difference within feminism is combined with an ideal of unity (cf. Lovibund, 1989) that ensures political purpose is never eclipsed.

A number of feminists have pointed out that historical periodizations are rooted in gender-specific perspectives (Jardine, 1985; Christopherson, 1989). Consequently the trajectory of modernity/postmodernity has different implications for women and men. The notion that women have been excluded from modernity, to be recovered within postmodernity or by post-Enlightenment Marxism, merely reinscribes women's marginalisation within patriarchal culture. Without feminism radical geography reinforces this categorisation whether embracing or resisting postmodernity.

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References


