



POSTMODERNISM AND THE LOCALITIES DEBATE:
ONTOLOGICAL QUESTIONS AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL
IMPLICATIONS

by

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Buffeted by the changing winds of social theory, geography has recently explored a variety of new philosophies. Much of the searching was set in motion by the powerful impetus of postmodernism (Gregory 1987, 1989; Dear 1988; Ley 1989). Simultaneously, there has emerged a renewed interest in locally specific variations, i.e., a resurgence of regional geography in the guise of the localities debate (Cooke 1987; Warf 1988; Cox & Mair 1989; Lovering 1989). Curiously, the linkages between these two bodies of discourse have remained largely unspecified. This paper examines the emergence of postmodernism within geography and its linkages to the localities debate. It begins with a brief overview of the postmodernist thesis, stressing its epistemological challenges to conventional forms of social theory. Second, it moves to integrate the postmodernist perspective with the theoretical implications of the localities question. In brief, the argument holds that modernist metanarratives are doomed to be shattered on the shoals of locally unique social formations. Finally, the paper outlines the fundamentals of a truly postmodernist geography that confronts postmodernism at an epistemological, as well as ontological, level.

Postmodernism: a brief synopsis

Closely linked to the rise of capitalism and

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the industrial revolution, the modernist project that emerged from the Enlightenment spawned a comprehensive and seductive worldview (Berman 1982). Although it exhibited wide variations, modernism in large part centered around traditionally liberal themes such as the rationality of human beings, the privileged status of science as the only valid form of knowledge, the technological mastery of nature, the inevitability of progress, and teleological views of history (both Marxist and Hegelian), in which the past inevitably gives way to the present. Epistemologically, modernism centered around the search for universal truths independent of time, place, or the social circumstances of theoreticians themselves. In both its positivist and Marxist forms, modernist thought hinged upon a foundationalist philosophy in which universal 'laws' unveil a single, underlying truth that exists external to human beings, i.e., truth is the uncovering of objective reality, not a social constructed convenience. Modernism appropriated for itself the mantle of objectivist rationality, marginalizing all other, competing discourses by confining them to the realm of the irrational.

Recently, the modernist project has come under mounting criticism. Positivism, the paradigmatic expression of modernism, portrayed social reality in physicalist terms borrowed from the natural sciences (e.g., the gravity model). Positivism has been attacked for its ahistoricism, its lack of an explicit conception of social relations, its neglect of issues of power, its inability to theorize human consciousness, its insistence on an

unobtainable value-free objectivity, its substitution of technique for theory, and its tendency to degenerate into atheoretical empiricism. By ignoring the historical dynamics of power, positivism leads to the disturbing political implication that social reality is not produced by human beings in historical contexts, and is therefore not mutable, changeable, or subject to conscious action. Likewise, the other great modernist philosophy, Marxism, has come under mounting criticism because of its economic determinism (the reduction of social determination to class and production), its teleological reading of history, its neglect of consciousness, and its arrogant assumption of a unique claim to 'scientific' status (Duncan & Ley 1982; Gould 1988). Despite their manifold differences, structural Marxism and positivism share numerous similarities, including an obsessive emphasis on 'universal laws' of explanation (whether it be distance decay or the labor theory of value), in which explanation consists of showing particular events to be the outcome of general processes; a tendency to dismiss human consciousness as unimportant in social life; a refusal to confront the importance of language and symbolic meaning in theory; and the reduction of geographic relations to a passive, secondary status, generally by privileging time over space. All of these faults have been thoroughly exposed in the shift to postmodernism.

The emergence of postmodern thought reflects several parallel developments in multiple disciplines, including: the reassertion of time and space into social theory (Soja 1989), including the revival of regionalism and questions of local uniqueness (Warf 1988); extended explorations into questions of culture, language, knowledge, and ideology (Giddens 1984); the flowering of textual analysis, literary theory, and deconstructionism, in which society is viewed as permeated by multiple, contradictory meanings; the maturity of ethnomethodology (Geertz 1983); the demise of structuralism and teleological explanation; and the shift away from class-based models of social analysis to other forms of social determination such as gender and ethnicity (Kellner 1988). All of these approaches exhibit a sustained distrust of theory and a deep appreciation for the complexity of social determination, the openness of social systems, the heterogeneity of social life, and the importance of conscious-

ness and subjectivity. (Of course, postmodernism is far from constituting one monolithic school of thought, but multiple, and at times, conflicting, sets of interpretations; for purposes of analytical convenience, these variations shall be overlooked here – this discourse, like all discourses, has its own silences).

The origins of postmodernist philosophy are often attributed to Lyotard (1984) and Jameson (1984), who expressed deep skepticism of all modernist 'metanarratives' rooted in transhistorical, universal 'truths'. In contrast, postmodernism is an attempt to create a worldview devoid of such foundations. This view holds that the effort to forge comprehensive, all-encompassing theories of reality is doomed to failure; hence, postmodernism abandons the attempt to explain the world parsimoniously (Dear 1988). Postmodernists question the Enlightenment assumption that reality is fundamentally ordered, emphasizing instead its complexity, randomness, disorder, and chaotic nature. Among the social sciences in particular, there is little of the modernist attempt to borrow epistemological rules from the natural sciences (e.g., objectivity, reproducible results, the fact-value distinction, etc.) Instead of the rationally structured universe of modernism, the postmodern picture of reality is that of a puzzle of infinite complexity, an eclectic kaleidoscope, a collage so multitextured that it can never be adequately captured by a single theory. In short, reality is more complex than any language can adequately describe; as Mann (1986, p. 4) so aptly puts it, "Societies are much messier than our theories of them."

From this perspective, the modernist insistence on general theories is an arrogant fantasy. Postmodernists argue that notions of social structure arise from and are limited by the systems of representation used to interpret the world, all of which necessarily, inevitably oversimplify and hide more than they reveal. Like order, when we look for chaos we find it; buried within even the most sophisticated discourses are silences, which are also pregnant with meaning. Every truth is, consequently, connected to an observer and reflects his/her interest in putting forth one conception of the world over another. 'Truths' are, consequently, little more than transient, socially constructed fictions, not maps of a single objective reality. Thus all worldviews, whether they admit to such ex-

plicity or not, are necessarily partial, incomplete illusions constructed to serve historically specific discourses. Every worldview, every theory, every model is not only incomplete, but in some sense also misleading.

Opposing all unified worldviews ('totalizing discourses'), postmodernism also challenges Marxism, including transhistorical notions such as 'mode of production', 'class', and 'exploitation' (Graham 1988). Lyotard (1984), for example, argues that the Marxist emphasis on economic relations delegitimizes other forms of social practice and minimizes the diversity of human experience. Further, as with other forms of Enlightenment thought, Marxism presupposes the Western experience as universal (a common failure of modernization theory). Marxism, like all metanarratives, is forced to confront its own, historically specific origins within modernist thought and its inability to explain the specifics of social relations in particular times and places (see Gould 1988).

Put bluntly, postmodernism is not a new 'paradigm', it renounces the very notion of paradigms. In place of broad, universal metanarratives grounded in fundamental truths, it calls for *ad hoc*, localized discourses that are self-consciously limited in time and space, portraits of reality that aspire to be little more than fragmentary, ephemeral sketches of limited domains of experience (Kellner 1988). This does not make postmodernism synonymous with empiricism, as it retains an active role for theory in a new, relatively restricted sense; the term 'postmodern theory' is not an oxymoron. In the formulation of partial narratives, postmodernists emphasize problems of language and representation, including narratives, texts, symbolic forms, hermeneutics, and the assumptions of social and scientific analysis. Social meanings – knowledge – are fluid and everchanging because they are constructed through the diverse webs of interaction in everyday life, a perspective voiced by microsociologists such as Goffman (1959). Postmodern epistemology celebrates heterogeneity, not commonalities; it accepts uncertainty as inevitable; it refuses to insist on clear beginnings and endings; it emphasizes ephemerality rather than permanence; it points incessantly to the contradictions and silences of discourses as much as their content.

At this juncture, it may be helpful to pose

a number of difficult philosophical questions to the reader. For example, what makes theories that claim to grasp the essential order of the world preferable to those that do not? On what grounds do we accept one and not the other? If reality is fundamentally disordered, is not every pretense to order a fantasy? Do we insist on theories and models only because we are terrified of the alternative? Do we invent conceptual categories simply because we don't know what else to do? Is that a proper criterion for knowledge? Are models of the world that oversimplify it worse than none at all?

Lurking behind these epistemological questions is an important political one. Following Foucault (1972), postmodernism accepts that every act of interpretation is politically laden; every worldview serves some political interest and not another. Every theory, therefore, is not only an explanation, but a legitimation of a particular interest. Two powerful examples of this are offered by Smith (1986). In the nineteenth century U.S., the 'frontier' thesis of historian Frederick Jackson Turner became widely accepted: moving westward across the interior of the continent, the frontier delimited productive, Christian civilization from 'unproductive', pagan savages. From the perspective of late twentieth century social thought, such a thesis is easily exposed for its ethnocentrism; yet the real significance of Turner's frontier thesis is not its historical accuracy, but the powerful way in which it reveals the functions of legitimation that masqueraded as scientific explanation. Smith (1986) likened this issue to similar views of gentrification, in which the 'urban wilderness' is tamed by productive 'urban homesteaders', in the process reducing those on the other side of the frontier to nonhuman barbarians.

In the same vein, all social theory, no matter what its pretense to objectivity, hides behind its own notion of a 'frontier', if only through its silences (or, perhaps, especially through its silences). Thus, the political ramifications of postmodernism lay in their exposure of whose interests are served by particular views: every theory, every model, whether self-consciously or not, legitimates some interpretations of reality and not others. In this vein, it is worth asking whose interests the Enlightenment itself served, and to what degree those interests reflected the views of white males, as current debates in the U.S.

about 'political correctness' indicate.

Understandably, there is widespread ambivalence about the postmodernist perspective. For many, postmodernism is synonymous with intellectual anarchy, one that confuses appearances with 'deep reality' and substitutes superficial style for analytical substance. The most vehement opposition has come, unsurprisingly, from some Marxists, who have similarly denied the importance of local uniqueness and consciousness (Duncan & Ley 1982), subordinating all of these to the overriding dictates of class. Harvey (1989), for example, argues that postmodernism is little more than the culture of 'late' capitalism, an aesthetic response to rapid technological change (e.g., telecommunications), 'flexible accumulation', global markets, the compression of time and space, and the commodification of everyday life. Such objections provide a much needed historicization of postmodern culture and point to its ontological origins in late twentieth century global capitalism; like modernism, postmodernism has arisen within a definite historical moment marked by rapid and profound social upheaval. However, Harvey is utterly silent about the epistemological critique of universal metanarratives and reveals a commonality with other modernists, who continue to insist on 'universal laws' of explanation. As Dear (1991, pp. 537-538) puts it, "To be frank, Harvey is a much better political economist than he is cultural critic. . . . Precisely because of his inability to deal with difference, Harvey's response to the challenges of postmodernism and deconstruction has been to reconstruct a thoroughly modernist (Marxian) rationality. . . . Perhaps it is time that Harvey tried to transform his Marxism, instead of obliging the world to fit into it."

Soja (1989), on the other hand, celebrates postmodernism uncritically. He admirably unmasks the pervasive historicism of social science, in which time as an explanatory dimension became privileged over space, and argues (less convincingly) that the injection of space into social theory occurred through a revival of Western (nonstructuralist) Marxism. Despite his invocation of postmodernist rhetoric, however, Soja's empirical analysis of Los Angeles reveals deeply embedded modernist, not postmodernist, analytical categories in a manner not substantively different from Harvey (i.e., business cycles, invest-

ment, labor markets, etc.). It is curious that postmodernism has driven such a wedge within the camp of Marxists, and the future implications of this bifurcation are unclear. Thus, whereas some observers dismiss postmodernism as an irritating set of word games, to others it forms a serious challenge to the most deeply held assumptions of Western culture and has laid the basis for a thorough reworking of social theory.

Postmodernism and the localities debate

Geography's growing infatuation with postmodernism indicates that, as in other disciplines, here too 'totalizing metanarratives' are actively being recomposed as a shifting series of partial discourses (Scott & Simpson-Housley 1989; Gregory 1987, 1989; Dear 1988; Ley 1989). Two analytical consequences of this process are worth noting: first, the nature of social explanation – long oriented toward class by Marxists – has decisively broadened to include non-class based forms of determination, particularly gender and ethnicity. Second, this process has witnessed the insertion of time and space into the core of social thought (and a corresponding end to the privileged status of time over space), so that the analysis of situated social practices becomes deeply sensitive to the historical and geographic specifics of social life.

This transformation of theory is important in the light of the resurgence of regional geography and localities studies (Thrift 1983; Cooke 1987; Warf 1988; Cox & Mair 1989; Lovering 1989), which has reawakened interest in the local and the unique. The localities debate has done much to open discussion on the relations between place and process, theory and method, necessity and contingency, the abstract and the concrete, the local and the global. Curiously, however, there have been few attempts to forge explicit linkages to the concurrent debate over postmodernism (but see Bonnett 1989); in particular, the nature of post-Marxist, postmodern geographic explanation remains vague.

In this light, some dimensions of a postmodernist geography are offered here. In contrast to the positions advocated by Soja or Harvey, this approach attempts to grapple seriously with postmodernism at an epistemological, rather than simply at an ontological, level. Based on a critical reading of postmodernism, four essential elements of

a postmodernist geography are offered below:

Complexity – the explicit recognition that general metanarratives (including Marxism) have largely failed to capture the enormous variations within and among social formations. A postmodern geography, therefore, rejects the attempt to explain the social world parsimoniously (a relic of modernism); there is no Ockham's scalpel at work here. Thus, postmodern explanation rejects the assumption that explanation consists of showing particular events to be outcomes of wider processes. Rather, explanation is itself necessarily incomplete and limited by the language employed.

Contextuality – the reassertion of time and space into social theory (and an end of the primacy of time over space). Postmodern geography asserts that when and where things happen is central to *how* they happen. Thus, theory must acknowledge not only that knowledge is historically specific, but geographically specific as well, i.e., explanation must be tailored to the unique characteristics of places.

Contingency – the stress upon intentionality and human consciousness. Postmodern geography neither degenerates into an uncritical, ahistorical celebration of the individual (as in many phenomenological approaches) nor into Marxist overdetermination. The focus is upon intended actions and unintended consciousness, as revealed admirably through Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration, in which social systems contingently unfold across time and space. Rejecting teleological explanation, postmodern geography posits that landscapes are fashioned through conscious human agents circumscribed within a finite, ever changing set of constraints. Such an approach accepts that history and geography could always be 'otherwise', i.e., that the present is by no means guaranteed by the past; *thus, to know a society and a geography is to know how it could be different than it is.*

Criticality – the linkages between knowledge and power, the acknowledgement that every explanation is simultaneously a legitimation of a vested interest. Postmodern explanation asserts that the task of social knowledge is not simply to describe the world, but to articulate how it could be different. This approach shares in what Habermas (1968) calls the emancipatory tradition of social science.

Postmodernism is therefore doubly self-conscious: first, it recognizes itself as a historical product, and second, it makes explicit its own contribution to the making and remaking of social life.

Clearly the form of explanation depicted by these criteria departs radically from conventional, modernist accounts (both Marxist and positivist), with their search for universal 'laws' independent of time and space. In particular, it is critical to note that such an approach accepts regions as critical elements of social explanation not only ontologically (i.e., as real entities), but also epistemologically (i.e., as forms of knowledge). The unfolding of social relations is subject to enormous local variations; even 'identical' processes (e.g., deindustrialization) can and do have widely varying impacts on different areas (indeed, it was this phenomenon that largely gave rise to the localities debate (Massey 1984)). Hence, individual regions, caught up in 'universal processes' such as a changing national and international division of labor, also give these relations very different concrete forms. Further, regions do not simply passively 'receive' these changes, they actively reconstitute them (Thrift 1983). Social relations that extend across broad territorial expanses, therefore, cannot be separated from the specifics of individual places.

Thus, it follows from this line of thought that theories must be tailored to the specifics of regions. In the vein of postmodernism, generalized theories inevitably oversimplify the inherent complexity of individual places, masking their diversity and uniqueness in the attempt to force them into pre-existing conceptual categories. Geographic theory is obligated, therefore, to conform to the specifics of places by utilizing partial narratives highly sensitive to their individual histories. Postmodern locality research is not concerned about wider processes in the abstract, but the comprehension of the dynamics of specific places. There are no general theories of place; instead, theory accepts the intersections of numerous, overlapping social relations in unique, contingently created time-space settings (Giddens 1984).

Abstract theories cannot be imposed on a fluid, contingent reality, forcing social life to conform to the rigid expectations of the theorist. A postmodernist geography tolerates diversity, ambiguity, and inconsistency

among places rather than insisting upon uniformity and certainty; it refuses to obliterate their enormous heterogeneity in an obsessive search to impose general theoretical laws on landscapes. The delimitation of places includes multiple, shifting, overlapping, and even contradictory definitions and an exquisite awareness of the uniqueness of local social relations. Variations of social life are held to be central to the understanding of regions, not epiphenomenal products of overarching structures. Postmodernist geography does not attempt to reduce the complex inter-relations characteristic of all places into simple linear forms and a few fundamental 'truths'. (Of course, to be fair, this view also leaves unaddressed the equally gripping question as to how to explain the commonalities among places, the object of so much frenzied searches by modernist geographers.)

Further, a postmodernist geography circumvents the pervasive emphasis on class and production relations in social theory, both contributions of Marxism that denied the significance of non-class based relations (e.g., gender and ethnicity) as well as the entire domain of social reproduction. A sensitive understanding of places requires a non-reductionist theory in which social life is neither independent of, nor reducible to, classes and the spatial division of labor. Gender, age, ethnic, religious, and nationalist divisions skewer the worlds of production and reproduction just as they are likewise skewed by them.

Perhaps a few concrete, empirical examples exemplify this point. A postmodernist geography, structured epistemologically around the four sets of issues articulated above, recognizes that a theory of, say, lumber production in New Guinea must differ from a theory of lumber production (and the communities it involves) in the Northwestern U.S.; that a theory of poverty in New York is fundamentally different from a theory of poverty in London; that the explanation of the diffusion of AIDS in Africa is quite different from the explanation of AIDS in Europe; that the principles that explain the geography of crime in Mexico are not identical to those that explain crime in Moscow. In each case, there is a unique historical context and highly individualized circumstances; in each case, the class, ethnic, and gender relations are different; in each case, structural constraints and local ideologies are different.

The outcomes of the lumber industry, poverty, AIDS, and crime are different in each place; there is no reason to suspect that the mechanics that produce them are the same. Each phenomenon reflects a contingent set of circumstances not found anywhere else. Thus, in a postmodernist account, *where* these objects of study occur is significant to *how* they occur. Thus, there is no single abstract 'geographic space', but countless, heterogeneous places; there is no single theory of different social phenomena, but multiple explanations developed within the context of each time and place.

Closing thoughts

The ontological roots of the postmodernism and localities debates have become increasingly clear. Both reflect, albeit in highly different ways, social processes of restructuring and deindustrialization (Massey 1984), or, as Harvey (1989) argues, the transition from Fordist 'regimes' to post-Fordism ones (see also Albertson 1988). Combining these perspectives, it is clear that some places have been largely abandoned by capital (e.g., northern England, the U.S. 'Rustbelt') while others are being actively invigorated by surge of capital investment (e.g., the East Asian 'Tigers', Los Angeles, and Italy's Emilia-Romagna region); yet others exhibit aspects of both.

However, the implications of postmodern regionalism do not end with a modernist account of the shift to post-Fordism, a form of explanation that still relies upon universal metanarratives. There remains a second, more abstract level – epistemology – at which these analytical movements unfold. Far exceeding the intentions of its originators, the localities debate, by acquiring a pronounced postmodern aura, has reverberated to challenge the privileged status of metanarratives in geography. In particular, the applicability of universal 'laws' of explanation – if they ever existed in the first place – is increasingly open to question. Postmodern geography holds that regions make a difference not only to what we know about the world, but also *how we know it*. Thus, in knowledge as in social relations, geography can no longer remain a passive recipient of social change, but an active contributor to social explanation: where events unfold affects how they unfold. Generalized theories of place always, inevitably oversimplify the

inherent complexity of particular places, masking their diversity and uniqueness in a vain attempt to force them into pre-existing conceptual categories.

The epistemological implication of post-modern regionalism is thus a new form of explanation. Rejecting the positivist form of explanation, in which the unique is held to be the outcome of the general, postmodern geography holds that theory must be adapted to the temporal and geographical specifics of places. In contrast to modernist metanarratives, postmodern regionalism explicitly accepts that temporal and geographical

boundedness of theory, tolerating ambiguity and inconsistency among places rather than insisting upon uniformity and certainty. Every notion of places, every spatial scale of analysis, is, consequently, as misleading as it is revealing, as full of silences as it is messages. Every definition of a region is filled with politically laden biases. The task of a socially critical social science, therefore, is to unveil the biases of existing discourses and engage in the construction of new ones in which these biases, and their political implications, are clear.

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