

Review

Marxist feminism and postmodernism

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Arguing that it is too easy to release postmodernism as just another example of Western intellectual's separation from activism, this essay considers the connection between feminism and postmodernism as a largely anti-Marxist endeavour. The type of post-modern feminist theory that has blossomed, has presented distinct and well-documented challenges. It has destabilised previously secured categories and encouraged theorists to analyse meaning and relationships of power in a way that has called into question unitary, universal concepts and radically opened discussions concerning subjectivity, sex and gender. Taking into consideration postmodernism as a historically-situated occurrence rather than an intellectual abstraction or movement, the author contends that feminists and their allies need the fragmentation of identities not as a cause for celebration or an oppositional strategy, but rather as an effect of oppressive structures that must be analyzed within the context of their historical, political and economic specificity. It is this tension in postmodernism (between what is expressed and its expression between the latent and manifest) and its parallelism in feminist theory that is the interest of the study. It is the contention of the study that feminist postmodernism, like any other system of thought, has internalised contradictions that heightened during the 1980s and are now becoming self-evident.

Key words: Marxist feminism, postmodernism, identity.

INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism, is premised on an explicit and argued denial of the kind of grand projects that both 'socialism' and 'feminism' by definition are, but it is not something one can be for or against (Willis, 2004: p. 52). It is a cultural climate as well as an intellectual position, a political reality as well as an academic fashion, to predict that the arguments of postmodernism represent the key position around which feminist work would have to revolve.

Slightly later, Barrett, along with many others including Leonard, Benhabib and Walby, trace within feminist theory an extensive turn to culture, away from social sciences (Benhabib, 1995: p. 43). They argue that in the feminist theory located within the arts and humanities, there has been an overwhelming interest in discourse analysis and that there has been a parallel trend within what was left in the social sciences, away from social structure models to phenomenology and hermeneutics (Benhabib, 1995: p. 43).

Harvey assesses the impact of the same move into

cultural politics made by the New Left. The push into cultural politics, as suggested by him, was connected better with anarchism and libertarianism than with traditional Marxism (Harvey, 1999: p.83); but by embracing new social movements, by abandoning its faith in the proletariat as agent for change and leaving behind historical materialism, the New Left cut itself from its own ability to have a critical perspective on itself or on the social processes (Callinices, 1999: p. 81). It is not that the move was unfruitful, bringing to the fore questions of gender and race, politics of differences, politics of disability, problems wrought through colonisation and an interest in aesthetics, but it (postmodernism) was also a mask for the deeper transformations in the culture of capitalism (Barss, 2000: p. 23 - 25).

Postmodernism has been defined as an historical era corresponding to a new mode of production, post-fordism and as an attitude, a way of presenting and experiencing, very modern, if rather developed, modes of production

(Bielkis, 2005: p.12). If the mode of production has not been significantly altered, then it is pertinent to enquire whether it is possible to adopt a new attitude, to break from specific ways of thinking that bind the conditions of our social and political context, if they remain the same. In this paper, it shall be assumed that the conditions of modernity remain and that post modernity does not signify a distinct mode of production or form of social organisation. Now if postmodernism derives its aesthetic from some kind of struggle, perhaps from the fact of fragmentation, then it is important to establish why such a fact has been part of the modern experience and why the intensity of the experience picked up since the 1970s (Murphy, 1997: p. 103 - 105).

This attempt to destabilise universal concepts has also been accused of pulling the rug from under the feet of feminism; for if individuals cannot be conceived as women, belonging to a distinct group, then they cannot be expected to mobilise around common concerns, shared political identities or allegiances. Indeed, it has been suggested that unsettling concepts in this way has also left feminists unable to discuss the 'structural' context of power and the conditions of subjectivity: be it economic, social, psychological or linguistic (Spelman, 1990: p. 31-35). This is particularly awkward for some third wave feminists, such as Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, who contextualise third wave feminist perspectives by showing how they are shaped both by material conditions created by economic globalisation and techno culture and by bodies of thought associated with postmodernism and post structuralism (Wicke, 1994: p. 17-18).

The aim of this paper is to indicate what has been subsumed, elided and erased in the recent canonisation of feminist theory and to suggest that the exclusion of materialism, associated with socialist feminism, has led to a form of 'cultural' feminism within which is a particular thread of anti-realism leaving feminism unable to articulate, investigate or analyse its own conditions. Indeed, the recent discussions within Marxism about the economic crisis in the late 1990s, demonstrate that arguments within socialist and Marxist feminism were held aside from the 'mainstream', abandoned rather than resolved.

MODERN HISTORY OF FEMINIST PREMISE

Kristeva, in *Women's Time*, argues that the feminist movement can be divided into three distinct phases, which are liberal (existentialist), Marxism and radical post-modern (Mcelroy, 2002: p. 41). Recent feminist theorists, named by some as third wave, raise objections to the exclusive tendencies within feminist theory of the 1970s and 1980s arguing that the essentialism inherent in the first and second waves led to an eradication of differences. Through critiques of essentialism, third wave

feminists resist the seductive promise of inclusive identity, arguing that, far from providing the grounds for political agency, the assertion of commonalities among women leads to the neglect and even erasure of differences (Mcelroy, 2002: p. 47-48). The force of these arguments has since led to 'an increasingly paralysing anxiety over falling into ethnocentrism or essentialism'. One consequence of this anxiety over essentialism has been to delegitimize *a priori* any discussion about structural common grounds among women (Echols, 2002: p. 29-32). The blanket description and rejection of feminist theory particularly of the 60s and 70s, but also 80s as essentialist, is a real problem. Aside from the political consequences, the occlusion of some very careful discussions concerning social relations, economic determinants and mediation, results in a rather peculiar account of culture, which actually needs the very analyses jettisoned.

The second wave of feminists recognised that women had never been simply excluded from the social contract. It was agreed that modern social structures managed to include women in the political order in such a way that formal demands could be met without the substantial changes that liberal feminists thought would necessarily follow (Rosemary, 1997: p. 53 - 55). Influenced by American feminist theorists, such as Friedan, Millet and Firestone, radical feminists began to analyse the family, sexuality and forms of cultural representations. They concluded that the political gains of the first wave had been quite empty because traditional structures and values had been left in place and it was these very structures that defined the roles of men and women and gave femininity and masculinity different values: where the feminine is either, dominated, oppressed and exploited by men (Sommers, 1995: p.78). Patriarchy was defined as a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which though hierarchically, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women.

Radical feminism is characteristically concerned with the differences between men and women, differences in power and authority as well as different dispositions and characteristics. The 'problem with no name' and the 'women's question', was unwrapped as a number of issues such as: rape, domestic violence, pornography, low pay, division of labour, domestic labour, child abuse, social and political exclusions and the connection between all these and sexualised representations. Essentialists and anti-essentialists agreed that the liberal political slogan, 'equal but different', obviously mystifies the base fact that masculinity is valued over femininity and that men are guaranteed sanctioned domination over women (Barss, 2000: p.23-25). The structures themselves would need to be revised and revised according to different values. Some argued that the appropriate values were those associated with femininity. Others argued that characteristics associated with

femininity were a product of the very system to be replaced, hence a 'revaluation of all values' was required. Connecting these arguments was a belief in the real moral equality and value of men and women. This belief in the 'metaphysical' equality of all human beings existed side by side the beliefs that the two sexes are biologically different and the belief that because social systems change over time, the human subject (which is a result of such social processes, its abilities and characteristics) also changes. This theory of the changing human subject, constituted through her social relations, inaugurated a break from the 'abstract individualism' of liberalism and existentialism and this would, in the end, remove from the feminist project its ability to defend its humanist moral position. The growing distance (the gap) between the second and third wave feminism, described by Ann Brooks, seems to be premised on a very rough description of the variety of positions within radical feminism as essentialist and ahistorical.

These questions, perplexed second wave feminists during the 70s and, when trying to figure a path through, arguments concerning the nature of patriarchy and the causal origin of oppression became paramount. Socialist and Marxist feminists were not inured from such arguments raging within the women's movement. Fundamentally, they wished to analyse the material structures of patriarchy and capitalism, but had to first decide whether or not patriarchy should be analysed as a set of social institutions distinct from capitalism, with its own history and causal origins. If capitalism could be defined as the appropriation and exploitation of labour by one class of another, then patriarchy could be defined as the appropriation of labour and sexuality by one class (men) of another (women) (Butler, 1995: p. 81-87). If so, what is the relationship, specifically, between production and reproduction? Is male dominance the creation of capitalism or is capitalism one expression of male dominance? Marxist feminists attempted to identify gender relations in the context of production and reproduction as understood within historical materialism, where women were important in the struggle as workers and not as women. Dual systems theorists argued that patriarchy and capitalism are two distinct systems that only contingently intersect capitalist patriarchy. Unified systems theorists argued that theories of capitalism and patriarchy describe aspects of a single social system, which is gendered capitalism. Anti-systems theorists argued that feminists ought to look to Marx, not for an analytic met narrative, but for helpful explanations about specific historical events.

Although current feminist hystorograph describes Marxist feminism (materialism) as econometric, Marxists feminists actually recognised that the categories of economic analysis tend to reduce questions of power to the simple matter of who owned and controlled the means of production and who had surplus labour extracted.

Setting, by themselves, the task of redressing this, Marxist feminists tried to identify the operation of gender relations as and where they may be distinct from or connected with the process of production and reproduction, understood by historical materialism. The Marxist concepts of exploitation, alienation and the labour theory of value, with the implied exchange principle, were worked through theoretical explanations to clarify just how the intricate relationship between 'the private' and 'public' was entwined through and dependent upon material conditions (Eatherstone, 1991: p. 73-79).

Marxist feminism can be described as a unified system theory but those such as Jagger and Young attempted to introduce gender distinctive oppression as a necessary feature of capital. Vogel, for instance, stressed that Marxism is actually an inadequate theory as it stands and must be transformed; otherwise it would remain unable to account even for the dynamics of the labouring process. Substituting division of labour theory for class analysis, Young, a unified system theorist, attempted to develop a theory of gender-biased capitalism where class and gender relations had evolved together. By concentrating on the division of labour, she believed that it would be possible to be sensitive to the ethnic distinctions of a racist labour market. She argued that marginalisation of women, and our function as secondary labour force is an essential and fundamental characteristic of capitalism. Ellen Woods, a Marxist feminist, argued otherwise, stating that capitalism is uniquely indifferent to the social identities of people it exploits, undermining differences and diluting identities such as race and gender. When the least privileged sectors of the working class coincide with extra-economic identities such as gender and race, it may appear that the cause of the oppression lies elsewhere; but racism and sexism function so well in capitalist society because they work to the advantage of some members of the working class in the competitive conditions of the labour market.

This discussion came to its peak in the domestic labour debate of the 1970s and 1980s. The argument is concerned about the function of domestic labour and its role in the reproduction of capitalism and the argument raised the issue that men, qua men, benefit from women's oppression. The initial argument was between those who drew on Engel's speculative comments about the pre-capitalist sexual division of labour and those who argued that sex based labour roles were brought about by capitalism. Within the Marxist frame of reference, this argument was significant for only those involved in productive labour, while those producing commodities and surplus labour were considered to be part of the revolutionary class.

As pointed out by Shelia Rowbotham and Veronica Beechey, dual systems theorists, often referred to as socialist feminists, tend to separate out economic and sex relations: accommodating gender analysis within an exposition of patriarchy, rather than forcing the economic

analysis of Marxism to answer the questions outlined above. Patriarchy and capitalism can be considered to be analytically distinct, with their own interests, laws of motion and patterns of contradiction and conflict resolution (Gouliman, 2007: p.121-123). The intersection of the systems is a contingent fact and can be less than smooth, but the twin track approach can supplement the sex-blind Marxist categories and make explicit the systematic character of relations between men and women. Marxism cannot answer why women are subordinate to men inside and outside the family and why it is not the other way round, whereas according to Hartmann, feminist analysis can expose the fact that patriarchy has a material basis in men's control over women's labour power. The family wage debate noted above is one example of the resolution of conflict over women's labour power occurring between patriarchal and capitalist interests. Mitchell contended that the two systems are theoretically irreducible and argued that there had been a tendency in Marxism towards reductionism, such that the function and role of reproduction, sexuality and socialisation were taken to be determined by the economic base (Callinicos, 1999, p. 88). Indeed, in psychoanalysis and feminism, she suggested that the causes of women's oppression are buried deep in the human psyche.

Critics tried to combine insights of structural linguistics with psychoanalysis, to flesh out an analysis of the development of subject identity. The early argument is that women's relation to production, low pay, part-time work and economic dependency is a cause of oppression but that this operates in tandem with biosocial considerations and more general ideas circulating in society concerning masculinity and femininity. This psychoanalytic analysis of patriarchy, which is the supposed transition from monocausal to polyvalent analyses, prefigures the move into postmodernism (Woods, 2001: p. 71).

Radical feminist ideas about the complex nature of subject identity and the ways in which heterosexuality functions to maintain social stability, influenced the arguments between dual and unified systems theorists. Issues relating to sexuality were brought to the fore of the political agenda by work in women's refuges and rape crisis centred on pornography and culminated in the separatist and political lesbianism debates of the middle 70s to early 80s. These arguments centring on subject identity and sexuality, occurred as the British left, most notably the New Left Review, moved onto a philosophical terrain that could accommodate psychoanalysis and theories concerning the cultural significance of various forms of representation. This move, especially that of Juliette Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, into Lacanian psychoanalysis, was not uncontested, for example by Parveen Adams in *m/f*, but from it, rose a curious hybrid of literary and cultural studies (Berten, 1995: p. 18 - 19). Lovell suggests that the convergence of textual with

socio-historical analysis made cultural studies a natural habitat for feminist theory and this converges with Benhabib's description of the 'cultural turn' (Benhabib, 1995: p. 18 - 21).

Cultural studies have a tendency towards eclecticism and humanist and economist readings of Marx were replaced by an interest in 'Marxian' theorists such as Gramsci, Althusser, Lacan, Barthes and Foucault. At the time one of the most important questions seemed to be whether or not a socialist history, a historicised notion of human subjectivity could then be incorporated. Those, such as Cora Kaplan warned that unless semioticians and psychoanalytic theorists retained their materialist and class analyses, they would end up producing no more than 'an anti-humanist avant-garde version of romance'. Thus, the critique of the subject, which is the idea that apparent unified subject identity, is actually a consequence of antecedent linguistic and psycho-sexual processes, led to a series of arguments about the nature of psychoanalysis. Marxism and psychoanalysis share three basic characteristics. They present themselves as scientific and materialist, they question the viability of the idea of value free scientific method and are interested in the socialised human subject. However, although Marxism and psychoanalysis are concerned with processes of change, conflict and resolution, there is a fundamental disagreement as to the nature of the processes in question (Butler, 1995: p. 81-87). Those influenced by psychoanalytic theory argued that Marxists socialised structures which caused conflict and aggression and their explanations of commodity fetishism and ideology were profoundly one-dimensional. Marxists argued that psychoanalysis fetishised subjectivity, naturalised human motivation and posited invariant and universal psychic structures. In effect, Marxists argued that psychoanalysis was an individualised response to the misery of alienation and that the abstraction of the experience of alienation from its context resulted in a theory of individual reconciliation to the status quo. It is interesting to speculate what would happen to cultural theory and feminism if psychoanalytic theory turned out not to be merely misguided, but false.

INDIVIDUALITY THEORY AS MOVEMENT INTO POSTMODERNISM

Individuality theory made its appearance in the 80s, theoretically prefigured by the pivotal role of experience, almost an extreme form of empiricism in radical feminism, which is the left turn to psychoanalytic Marxism in the 70s and French literary criticism (Kennedy, 1999: p. 112). The 1980s saw a tremendous change in the political culture of the Britain, including what has been described as the demise of feminism as a political force, and it is only concerned here with the US which has its own internal dynamics. There was an intricate and complicated

relationship between the rise of Thatcherism, 'free market' fiscal policy, left disunity, the demise of feminism as a political force, the appearance of identity politics and theory focusing, almost exclusively on the issue of identity. It has been suggested that what distinguishes and shapes British feminism is its roots in the high levels of working class action in the 60s and 70s (Spender, 2000: p. 14 - 16). However, during the 80s, with a number of extremely important exceptions, including the Miner's Strike and anti-section 28 demonstrations, there was a general decline in trade union and labour activity. A contributory factor, in the political demise of feminism, was the tension within the Women's Liberation Movement that had been brewing for over a decade. Conflicts between radical and socialist feminists, between middle class and working class feminists, between black feminists and white feminists, heterosexual and lesbian feminists were played out in local organisations at conferences and through various editorial boards. These conflicts forced feminists into recognising their own location and acknowledging the universalising tendencies within feminist thought itself. It was no longer feasible to argue that just because an individual had a certain sex, she/he ought to align with a particular political movement and the goals of feminism as a political movement became hard to justify. This recognition occurred as divisions, concerning the appropriate place for feminist activity, which became entrenched. Some, such as Sheila Rowbotham and Hilary Wainwright, attempted to transform labour politics from within, whilst others argued that a more open and democratic political movement was incompatible with old style labour or workerist political groups.

Corresponding to this demise of feminism as a political force was a consolidation of academic feminism (Shildrick, 2004: p. 31 - 33). Academic feminism has, in turn, been described as a de-radicalisation of feminist theory and this has been linked to the rise of 'municipal feminism', the filtering through of women and feminist theory into public institutions, including, not exclusively, those of higher education. There are two main reasons why an increase in the mass of women in higher educational institutions could be causally related to a de-radicalisation of feminist theory. The first refers us to the ways in which the institutional body manages to exert a determining influence on the type of work done. The second refers us to the type of academic theory which became prevalent to take the first. An institution can be defined as a form of physical organisation which includes sedimented relations of power and lines of funding management. However, a certain 'norm' of academic practice and an image of an 'ideal' academic practitioner filter through. The rules of academic practice constrain and inform the content of the subject matter itself. In addition to these problems, which are endemic to all form of academic enquiry, as women's studies courses were gaining ground, the vicious spending cuts and

casualisation programmes of the 80s and 90s took place. There is a prima facie case for arguing that the type of academic work which was done was the type which could be safely funded and published. Additionally, one institutional imperative is the teaching and learning strategy. One does not need to be a Foucauldian to see how the pedagogical drive to construct a canon raises questions of inclusion and exclusion, genealogies and histories.

The second explanation for the deradicalisation of the theory concerns the nature of the theory itself. From literary theory to epistemology, architecture to geography and biology to law, feminist academic theory has blossomed. Moreover, identity theory has a supreme reign, and indeed poststructuralism has exerted a hegemonic influence on the directions within feminism. However, this has provided strategic and theoretical problems. It has been argued that feminist discourses of difference pulled the rug from under feminism as politics. This is for two main reasons. First, once the diversity of women is recognised and privileged over the community, any sort of collective and goal directed action becomes problematic. Secondly, the substance of feminist theory became itself and the purpose of the theory became a reflection on the interrogation of internal divisions and conflicting subject positions.

SOCIAL INTRICACY

Here, Ann Brook's idea that postmodernist feminism is fundamentally a critical project directed at essentialism, ethnocentrism and ahistoricism within branches of feminist theory would be picked up. Ann Brook's argument is that feminist theory is only plausibly a critical project if it jettisons a number of its key paramours and favoured beliefs. Principally, it is necessary to disambiguate the terms universalism, essentialism and naturalism. She left aside arguments concerning the body and gender, because she believes, these can only be addressed properly when a number of other beliefs have first been clarified (Anderson, 1998: p. 47 - 48).

She claims that the dilemma facing feminists involves a conflict between goals of intellectual rigour (avoidance of essentialism and universalism) and feminist political struggles (directed towards liberation of women as women). Feminist theory, she believes, is necessarily implicated in a series of complex negotiations and, if it cannot maintain its political freedom from patriarchal frameworks, methods and presumptions, its implication in them needs to be acknowledged (MacIntyre, 1984: p.81).

Marxism, with its theory of alienation that is perhaps dependent on a naturalist account of species seems to fall by this sword, as does its scientific pretension and approach to historical investigation which prioritises labour activity, by exploitation, as an analytic category.

The relationship between universalism and

essentialism is also a target for Elizabeth Spelman, who maintains that this is a metaphysical error that has fairly extreme political consequences. First, she believes that individuals are not a sum of universally applicable properties (race, ethnicity, class and sex). Since there are no consistent properties that the individuals share, the term 'woman' is considered not to designate a natural group (Giddens, 1991: p. 87). Following this, because the assertion of universal or common property is false, the ways in which universals function are suspected, in that interested classification is presented as a neutral standard against which the instances are judged. This is a problem both within and without feminist theory, where norms are wrongly taken to be common to other individuals of the kind, generalised from a singular standpoint (usually identities and experiences of privileged women generalised as representative of all women).

The reluctance of contemporary feminists to identify themselves with a theoretical patronym, such as Marxist feminist, is an indication of the profound distrust and suspicion, feminists display towards socio-political theories. Feminists no longer have faith in the utility of these theories to explain or clarify status of women because they are marred, not by superficial sex-blindness, but by something that is altogether more profound (Spelman, 1990: p. 71-73).

1. Reason: Rationality defined against the feminine and traditional female roles. So for Marxism, we have scientific pretensions, telos and dialectics.
2. Dualisms: For example, reproduction / production, family / state and individual / social. Neither liberalism nor Marxism, she says, is able to think outside these dualisms. Dualisms are inherently hierarchical, with the feminine aligned.
3. Power: Taken to be something one has or does not have, principally manifested in regulation and control of politico-economic relations.
4. Oppression: Tends to assume a body that is gendered; something picked up by Haraway in her Cyborg essay.

CONCLUSION

The global nature of developing capital raises further questions which third wave feminists must, through their own logic, address, and to do so they need to reclaim their feminist history. Is there a general trend towards downward economic mobility or is there a global feminisation of poverty? Is there necessarily a feminisation of labour or is there a tendency towards homogeneity? Is the family a legal and ideological unit or / and is it a place of resistance? What is the connection between child poverty and family structures? What is the impact of multinationals in local economies? Is the labour market fragmented (according to race and gender) and is

this incorporated into, perhaps created by, the efficient extraction of surplus? How do we understand the move into, and war fought over, the Middle East? Do questions of sexuality rise to the fore when gender relations are unsettled? How do we make visible, understand, respond and fund our response to child abuse, domestic violence, date rape, rape and snuff movies?

Harvey assesses the global context of the third wave of feminism as transnational capital, downsizing, privatisation, a shift to the service economy, general downward economic mobility and technoculture, all of which corresponds to a new form of feminist anti-capital, local and anarchic activism (Harvey, 1999: p.101-105). In their attempt to navigate the fact that there are few alternatives outside the production / consumption cycle of global commodification, third wavers, critically engage with and celebrate consumer culture. According to Shildrick, third wave feminists appropriate girl into a remarkably productive girlie culture. This often involves a celebration of popular modes of femininity, including barbie dolls, makeup, fashion magazines and high heels (using them they say, is not short for 'we have been duped'), which are ironic femininity (Shildrick, 2004: p. 113).

Cultural or populist third wave feminists are thus supposed to accept their constituted female identity and its representation and, at the same time, incorporate both a radical analysis of the signifying chain and a belief that somehow the agent can manipulate that which is signified. The point that marks this feminism as pivotal to a certain moment of capitalist development is whether or not it can grasp the agency within self-representation and the appropriation of that agency. Thus the argument about the commodification of the feminine aesthetic becomes an argument about whether or not valourisation is identical to reification. How can we tell whether the recent valourisation of difference, its fetishisation as intensity, self-affirmation and grrrl power is a precise response to particular social conditions? Ironic gestures may appreciate contingency and insert cognitive distance, but also risk collapsing into more of the same gestures. What appears to be a creative harnessing of archaic power might instead turn out to be the subordination of the aesthetic to the modern commercial logic, which is the repetitive sameness of the exchange commodity form that must always appear new. The more we repeat the mantras of difference, diversity and pluralism, the more we hear modernist echoes, warning us that there is an inverse proportion between this jargon and homogenisation. Lagging somewhat behind the United States developer who said in 1988 that postmodernism was over, Garry Potter and Jose Lopez in 2003 declared that it is in a state of decline 'gone out of fashion' not only because its most radical propositions today seem rather banal, but also because it is an inadequate response to the times in which we live (Greer, 2003: p. 88 - 91). Realism, they propose, offers a more

reasonable and useful framework from which the philosophical and social challenges of this century is approached, and so it is realism, rather than postmodernism, that offers a truly fruitful engagement with questions from a variety of academic disciplines.

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