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# Reinventing Radical Geography: Is All That's Left Right?

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These are indeed both trying and heady times for radical geographers. Politically, many of us are feeling battered and bruised by backlashes against progressive ideas and politics. In the social sciences, the emergence of postmodern and poststructuralist philosophies, theories, and methods has deeply shaken our faith in modernist science, and in social theories and methods which claim broad and extensive explanatory power. Radical traditions of inquiry, in particular Marxism, have been subjected to severe and sweeping criticism as the “incarnation” of the flaws of rationalist social science (for example, Deutsche, 1991; Harvey, 1992; Mouffe, 1988; Palmer, 1990). If every age has its demons, historical materialism is certainly a central one for postmodern scholars.

The feminist movement, now a force to be reckoned with in and outside the academy, continues to endure serious political backlash within our communities: threatening the credibility of its members, their political projects, and sometimes even their lives (Faludi, 1991). Within academia, feminists worry about their on-going marginalization and exclusion from power, and about whether or not men will engage with their work in ways that further, distort or obstruct feminist agendas (McDowell, 1992).

It is vital to recognize that we are living through a period of the re-representation of and re-creation of progressive research, in which not only the terms and conditions of our work are being radically altered, but also possible ways of discussing its meaning and import. In the language of the times, new “interpretive

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communities” are being developed, communities that may well end up being as or even more exclusionary and oppressive than their predecessors. One indication of this are the ways in which radical alternatives, such as Marxism, are being re-represented in the literature and debate. The representation of Marxist work as “modernist science,” for instance, invokes the very interpretive closure these scholars claim to critique. By casting any work within this tradition as a “totalizing metanarrative” critics leave no openings for a reconstructed Marxism, and distort and negate the many contributions made by scholars drawing on historical materialist traditions. Sadly, there are a great many examples of this in the literature and in our own discipline (for example, Blomley and Clark, 1990; Collins, 1982; Deutsche, 1991; Mouffe, 1988; Saunders and Williams, 1986). Even quite sophisticated accounts of theory and explanation in Marxist work, such as that provided by Barnes (1992), seem intent on reductionist representations of the tradition where, in this case, the common denominator in all explanations is a single metaphor (reproduction). It is a short, if dubious, step from this biological metaphor to the claim that there is no room for human agency in this tradition. But the important point is that this step is dependent on representing Marxist explanation in a very reductionist way.

Clearly, then, one of the dangers of reinventing ourselves in postmodern ways is that we will be “seduced” by representations of radical research which distort past work and are relatively empty of substantive proposals for building progressive and transformative geographies (see also Harvey, 1992). In the process we are likely to jettison prematurely the many valuable legacies of the New Left, including a clear political understanding that our projects must be deliberately and self-reflexively constructed to “connect” with struggles against oppression and exploitation. McDowell (1992) makes the related and important point that the adoption of new textual and interpretive strategies, without greater engagement with radical traditions like feminism, risks creating academic approaches which are elitist, closed, and divorced from efforts to confront and change the politics of science. Ironically enough, there is often a marked ‘disjuncture’ between representations of interpretive and poststructuralist approaches as ‘progressive,’ and their actual political substance.

Indeed there is sobering evidence that the “interpretive turn” is in many instances a detour around and retreat from political engagement in struggles outside the academy. Palmer (1990), reviewing developments in social theory and in social history, observes that the adoption of poststructuralist and postmodern approaches by eminent scholars on the Left has been closely tied to a retreat from politics. Fraser (1989), examining the work of the French Derrideans, demonstrates that the “interpretive” or postmodern turn has been associated with an extremely confused treatment of political questions and decreased emphasis on the politics of academic work. Closer to home, in geography, I have been struck by how seldom we discuss, in print or at conferences, the implications of our “reinvented” approaches for the politics of academic work. And yet surely it is precisely during a period of major revision and reconstruction of our approaches that we most need to discuss political matters. That is

unless, of course, part of the hidden or perhaps not fully recognized agenda of at least some postmodern shifts is the jettisoning of radical political projects.

There is, of course, no doubt at all that the “turn” has stimulated a flurry of intellectual activity and a sense of excitement about critical work in the humanities and social sciences. Representation, discourse, and metaphor have become new “watchwords” or, if I can be permitted religious metaphor, “mantras” of the postmodern age (Barnes and Duncan, 1992; Jackson, 1991; Ross, 1988). We are learning, too, about the complex ways in which texts, images, and discourse shape our understanding of and responses to power (for example, hooks, 1992; Smart, 1989; Weedon, 1987). Following in paths carved by poststructuralist thinkers like Foucault, we are beginning to see how power and oppression are imbricated in multiple sites of experience and practice, in virtually every aspect of our lives, and how in a very real sense challenging our oppressions requires reinventing ourselves (compare Harding, 1991) and our relations to others.

Somehow, and I’m sure we will find a way, we need to figure out how to balance our celebration of these intellectual accomplishments, with thoughtful and inclusive discussions about what may be missing from the new radical geographies, whether or not it matters, and what we can do about it. It is interesting, for example, to observe how the working class and other disadvantaged groups, like the disabled, are often curiously absent from the landscapes represented in postmodern cultural geographies of the city (for example, Knox, 1991; Ley and Mills, 1993). It is not that these analyses are in themselves technically deficient (in fact both of those cited are very good), but that the interpretive “lenses” of postmodern theory and culture seem to shift attention to relatively affluent professionals (like us!) and landscapes of “consumption” and “spectacle.” For the disadvantaged, on the margins of our economies and cultures, these landscapes have a radically different meaning: one of exclusion and negation. If the divergent meanings and experiences associated with different oppressions and landscapes in our societies are not being brought into focus by the new critical perspectives, perhaps we need to consider adjusting our conceptual and methodological “lenses.”

In rethinking radical geographies, it is important to remind ourselves that research is in itself a political process quite irrespective of whether or not we choose to discuss those politics explicitly (Harding, 1991). The use of theories that focus on the lives of middle-class professionals (us again!) is a way of aligning ourselves with that group in the creation and dissemination of knowledge. That is to say, of treating our/their knowledges as especially interesting and important. Similarly, the use of theories and methods incorporating the vantage points of oppressed groups, like women or the disabled, is a political act and, potentially at least, a political alliance. So, a very important question for us, as we respond to and incorporate postmodern views of science and social theories in our research, is where is this leading us in terms of a politics of science and research? And if it is leading us in liberal or conservative or

even just “plain old confused” directions, maybe this isn’t exactly where we want to be.

A related challenge for us, as we try to negotiate the “interpretive turn” or, as Slater (1992) puts it the “postmodern interruption,” is to discuss openly and inclusively what we want to accomplish, in a substantive sense, through our research. Is playful, or for that matter sober, description of the “pastiche” and “whirl” of postmodern existences and destabilization or deconstruction of the metaphors and assumptions used to interpret that existence really enough? Yes, in principle this opens up our narratives to multiple voices and perspectives. But in practice this alone merely creates representations of inclusion in our discourses and texts without necessarily challenging lived relations of exclusion and marginalization in the creation of texts, discourses, and knowledge.

Do we face a real danger, then, as Eco in *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988) suggests, of becoming so enamoured of and driven by our own accounts and understandings of life’s meaning, in our shared but partial interpretive acts and accounts, that our work and our lives become increasingly “unreal” and insular: detached from and uninformed by the existences, struggles, and knowledges of those outside our texts and discourses? Do we, in other words, risk recreating some of the worst flaws of modernism in the guise of postmodern social research?

We need to discuss as well what we see our work contributing, socially, in an era where description and interpretation are the fashion and the status of explanation is at best rocky. I think, as the “interpretive turn” has reminded us, that we need to pursue radical research which challenges the privilege accorded to academic and expert vantage points in rationalist social science. But this does not mean that we are necessarily limited to idiosyncratic or elitist description and interpretation. Politically engaged research designs, which have as part of their project the inclusion of nonacademics involved in the study, offer one way of decentering academic perspectives without necessarily eschewing explanations of processes of social change (Chouinard and Grant, 1993). Equally important is reminding ourselves and others that any explanation is partial and open. At the end of the day, however, if we cannot reasonably claim that our research contributes to better understandings of the causes and consequences of social power and oppression, however partial and limited those may be, it is time to hang up our hats (at least the radical ones) and go home. For if all knowledges are equal, and every interpretation valid, at least in the eyes of the present elite academic “interpretive community,” the most radical thing we could do would be to resign en masse so that our places could be filled with more representative cross-sections of people and particularly people who now tend to be excluded from and marginalized within academia (for example, women, the disabled, gays and lesbians, the poor). Imagine how quickly the “old” assumptions would be deconstructed then!!

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