

'Postmodern' in the Attic: The Age-Old 'Postmodernity' of Geography

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between Geographical thought and 'Postmodernism'. It does so through a comparative analysis of classical Geographical thought and postmodern theory in geography. Through this, the paper shows that Geography has always had postmodern tendencies within its ranks. It therefore argues that 'postmodernism' in Geography should be understood as a dialogic tool rather than as an external theoretical import. The presentation of its findings follows a narrative format.

Keywords: Human Geography, Postmodernism, Classical Thought, Geographical Theory

"It must show that each nationality brings its own precious building stone for the general development of the commonwealth, and that only small parts of each nation are interested in maintaining national hatreds and jealousies. It must be recognized that apart from other causes which nourishes National jealousies, different nationalities do not yet sufficiently know one another; the strange questions which each foreigner is asked about his own country, the absurd prejudice with regard to one another which are spread on the both extremes of the continent --- nay, on both banks of the channel amply prove that even among whom we call educated people geography is merely known by its name" (Kropotkin, 1885, p. 941)

"Regional Geography in itself is sterile; without the continuous fertilization of generic concepts and principles from systematic geography, it could not advance to higher degrees of accuracy and certainty in interpretation of its findings" (Hartshorne, 1939, p.644)

Neither Kropotkin nor Hartshorne was 'postmodernist' in the strictest sense of the term; in fact, both are generally classified as 'modern' geographical thinkers, and exemplify, in some sense, a 'true inheritance of the enlightenment tradition'. Given this, one may find it quite absurd to start discussing 'Postmodernism' through their words or, in fact, the words of any of their contemporaries. However, a deeper exploration of classical geographical thought would urge us to go beyond this conventional understanding of 'postmodernism' and thus be more perceptive of the influence of 'postmodern thought' over the subject.

It is normally assumed that 'postmodernism' in Geography begins with figures like Foucault, Derrida, Chambers, and similar 'postmodern' thinkers, whose areas of expertise are typically

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identified as falling outside the discipline of Geography (Creswell, 2013). However, developments in geographical thought urge students of geography to look beyond the codified institutional realm into the extra-institutional world of geographical thought and action, while trying to understand and categorise 'postmodernism' and its impact on geography as a subject. After all, as Mona Domosh (1991) would argue, our definitions of geography have always been limited, and its historiography has always been exclusionary.

This paper examines the relationship between 'postmodernity' and Geography using a comparative analytical framework, in which the characteristics of classical geographical thought are compared with the major tenets of postmodern geographical theory. While doing so, it goes beyond a strict institutional understanding of the growth of the subject.

'Postmodernism' and Geographical Thought

For Derek Gregory (1989, p.68), "(postmodernism) is a movement beyond the modern and simultaneously an invitation to construct our own human geographies". It raises urgent questions about place, space, and landscape, and how they are produced. For Gregory, being a critique of the enlightenment project, 'postmodernism' is post-paradigmatic. It is suspicious of all those systems that claim comprehensiveness and question the claims of all metanarrative legislatures regarding the proper conduct of geographical enquiry and the exclusion of work beyond their competence (ibid). 'Postmodernism' denies the fullness of any system of thought and, since it is incomplete, necessitates the interdependence of different systems for different purposes, while remaining sensitive to their differences and disjunctures. It hence rejects 'totalizing ambitions' along with superorganic logic and the prospect of the existence of deeper structures. Heterogeneity, particularity and uniqueness are distinguishing features of 'postmodernism'. For him, 'postmodern geography' made 'deconstruction of modern geography' the primary task of many geographers rather than attempts at 'reconstruction' (ibid, 71).

One of the biggest contributions of 'postmodernism' to geography, one can argue, is its emphasis on the role of power and hegemony in the geographical thought process. A critical evaluation of not just systems but the discipline itself and the impacts of its own gaze was made possible. From the works of Tuathail and his contemporaries, it is evident that the discursive use of geography by imperial state machinery was recognised and that this recognition led to a revolution against such practices in geographical thought (Tuathail, 1996). The tools made available by the 'postmodern' deconstruction of geography were the most potent devices during this revolution. A subsequent challenge to pre-given boundaries and orders was carried out alongside a theoretical investigation of the "politics of geographical specification of politics" (ibid., p. 48).

It is this questioning of boundaries that has led 'postmodern' thought to recognise the need for coexistence. It enabled many to recognise the simultaneous presence of varied oppressions. It not just challenged ways of knowing but knowledge itself (Domosh, 1991). The challenge it posed to knowledge prompted the transcendence of binaries which were plastered during the development of earlier Geographical thought, and the liberation of oneself and the discipline from the assumed ground upon which knowledge is constructed (Gregory, 1989). It brought back into the lore the idea that spatial attachments and localities play an equally important role

in shaping people's lives (McDowell & Massey, 1984). An avenue for various forms of political thought to cooperate and enter into a dialectical relation with one another was created. A closely related contribution of 'postmodern' movements to geography is the recognition of the problem with representation and the textuality of all concepts and terms (Tuathail, 1996). The heterogeneity of the histories of concepts and the very positionality of language were examined.

Limitations of the understanding of postmodernity in Geography.

All said and done, the abovementioned view presents 'postmodernism' as a detached political development, separate from the development of the discipline of geography and that of geographical thought. A mere reading of 'postmodernism' as a philosophical thought that later made inroads into geography not just renders geography as a passive receptor and negates the subject's historical evolution, but also creates a deep-seated crisis within the subject. First of all, such an understanding renders us nothing to study about, given there is no single 'postmodernity', making one think 'that 'postmodern' geography is a diverse and bewildering project'. Second, as Creswell pointed out (2013), the irony at the heart of the 'postmodern' conceptualisation of replacing one set of metanarratives with an "anti-totality" metanarrative will become stark.

Discussions that point out saying that the above-mentioned advances in thought are contributions of 'postmodernism' alone, and up till 'postmodern days' paradigms ran the world, neglect the contributions given by previous strands of geographical thought in developing 'postmodernity' itself. It's also, in a way, falling into the trap of listening only to stories told by structured academic disciplines, which are part and parcel of power structures.

At the heart of the 'postmodern' movement lies not a politics of rejection but a politics of democratisation of Geographical thought through a process of dialectics. As Tuathail points out, "to declare something meaningless or imprecise is to assume to know the final state of full meaning and the precise use of concepts that are imagined to be stable and homogenous" (Tuathail,1996). It is this assumption which 'postmodern' thought questioned and critiqued throughout, hence rejecting something will be ironic enough for any form of 'postmodernism'. Therefore, 'postmodernism' need not necessarily signal the end of a paradigm in geographical thought, but should lead to the acceptance of multiple paradigms. Also, to argue that 'postmodern' politics replaced existing macro-structural understanding is inaccurate and dangerous. Despite challenging the political movement which many of these thoughts have initiated, such an understanding will also pitch 'postmodernism' against certain knowledge systems. But a historical analysis of the growth of these thought processes will tell us how 'postmodernism' inspired them to restructure themselves and how their dialogue with 'postmodernism' further strengthened their own position in conceptualising geography.

The institutionalised understanding of 'postmodernism' as a revolutionary way of knowing also raises another issue. It can effectively lead 'postmodernism' to be categorised as a 'counter revolution' in the way Harvey postulates the development of theory in the social sciences (Harvey, 1972). Such a categorisation will alienate 'postmodernism' and, hence, leave other streams of geographical thought stagnant, without the chance for productive dialogue with it.

Going back to the attic: Understanding the postmodernity of Geography

Given the above limitation and the dilemmas it posed for the discipline of geography, newer ways of understanding postmodernism's relationship to geography began to emerge. France J. Schuurman (2000), even while rejecting its destructive tendencies, recognised postmodernism's biggest contribution to be the creation of a more sensitive geography. Creswell started to believe that "the challenges of 'postmodernism' to the certainties of more traditional forms of academic knowledge opened up opportunities for a reinvigorated geography" (Creswell, 2013, p.190). Gregory (1989) noted that cross-fertilisation has contributed largely to the development of 'postmodern' thought. The ease of interaction which came with 'postmodern' thought not just helped geography to reclaim the importance of Space in the social realm (Massey, 1991) but also contributed to the active communication between 'other' streams of thought and led it back into the wider debates from which it had distanced itself for a long time. In other words, a larger number of thinkers began to consider postmodernism as a dialogic project that enabled geography to engage with non-institutional and informal viewpoints and to develop theoretical perspectives in subjects outside it.

This transition in viewpoint, however, challenges the idea that treats postmodernism as a break. Given the deconstructionist movements of various shades that occurred within Geographical thought, even while accepting that a comprehensive theorisation of the 'postmodern' project is comparatively new, they enable one to recognise the age-old practice of postmodernity within geography. Let's start with the anarchist Kropotkin. The entire anarchic geographical movement was premised on the idea that geography had served the elites and the imperial world order (Creswell, 2013). The Anarchists fiercely criticised the spread of colonialism and the role of geography in that. By rejecting a position at a highly renowned institute and propagating a 'post-state' politics, Kropotkin's anarchic views were undoubtedly aware of the strength of parallel knowledges and locational uniqueness. 'Reconstructed regional geography,' another school associated with modernist outlook, was also necessarily post-enlightenment in its vocabulary and its politics (Pudup, 1988). Interestingly, Pudup not only argues that one needs to find a reconstructed way to see regional geography through methodological-theoretical introspection, but also calls for a dialogue among traditional regionalists to achieve the same. She says that "reconstructing regional geography requires widening the compass of arguments to include traditional regional studies along with spatial sciences. But the compass must be widened further to include geographies' kindred disciplines, like anthropology, history and sociology, which are actively engaged in similar pursuits" (Pudup, 1988, p.385). As we have already seen, some of the greatest achievements of 'postmodern' geographies are said to be the same.

It's quite interesting to note that one of the political intentions of the emergence of radical geography was indeed to parallel the manipulation and control that geography permitted to the capital-State nexus through its pursuits. This does not stray far from the political understanding of a 'postmodernist', about the power and the might of the geographical Gaze. Even within the radical movement, parallel tales of fighting the 'demon' were always present. "William Bunge, for instance, had turned away from his calculations to lead 'expeditions' in run-down areas of inner-city Detroit. He suggested that geographers needed to escape the confines of the academy

and ask the inhabitants of the inner city how they could help" (Cresswell, 2013, 124). This simultaneously demanded a deconstruction of institutional geography and invited newer knowledges by recognising the existence of 'other' knowledges. While Mitchell (2003) writes of dead labour and social construction of landscape, a strict 'postmodern' understanding cannot reject it but only appreciate and enrich it. The language of humanism and 'postmodernism' is distinguished by a very thin, porous line of differentiation. Buttimer, while talking of a language of dialogue (Buttimer, 1976, p.278), ends up talking of nothing but a dialectic. Liz Bondi's argument regarding feminism being the instigator of 'postmodernism' also requires attention in this regard (Cresswell, 2013)

That said, the attempt here is not to argue that 'postmodernism' is another of these ways of knowing; Geographical thinkers like Gregory (1989) have already pointed out the fault lines between 'postmodernism' and these schools of thought. Rather, the point here is to note that all of these are very much present in 'postmodernism.' Though given the time and space they occupied in the intellectual realm, they failed to find the proper words, they were speaking a language that, to some degree, meant what postmodernism argues. Like postmodernism, the classical thinkers, too, recognised differences, called forth to understand the 'other,' and demanded entry into a dialectic with other viewpoints.

Conclusion

What this paper intends to argue, therefore, is that the understanding of the 'postmodernity' of geography shall not be considered merely as a radical overthrow of any of the existing geographical and philosophical thought, especially 'modern geographical thought,' and as something which happened in the late part of the 20th century. Rather, the 20th-century upsurge of 'postmodernity' within the subject shall be understood as the mainstreaming or recognition of a dialogic and deliberative nature which was always there in geographical thought and practice, pointing out the asymmetries of the knowledge produced and rejecting the universalities of institutionally backed knowledge. In other words, Geography was always 'postmodern'; it does not have to become one. Chained to the paradigmatic understanding purported by Kuhn, and to the institutional modes of knowing, we failed to recognise it, maybe until recently.

But then, what is the whole point of recognising 'postmodernism' as a dialogue or as something which existed for a long time has to do with Geography's 'postmodern' being? It is important to prevent 'postmodernism' from destabilising Geography and from becoming institutionalised. 'Postmodernism' is highly criticised by Marxism and Feminism (Cresswell, 2013; Domosh, 1991) for reproducing familiar hierarchies (Cresswell, 2013) and for destabilising the political movements that geographical enquiry and structural understanding have initiated. The chances for the 'postmodern' condition to be appropriated by ultra-conservative groups are also a serious threat which geography needs to be worried about. A reinvigoration of space in the realm of social can be accompanied by reactionary appropriation of that space. For the sense of space to be progressive, as Massey (1991) argues, one needs to consider the power geometries. But power geometries are felt differently, and hence, to know the subjectivities of power geometries, geography needs to provide space for dialogue between various ways of knowing. However, considered as an epistemological experiment, the chances for 'postmodernity' to

facilitate that will be limited. The only way to keep a check on 'postmodernism's' subsequent quest to become a 'non-totality' metanarrative is to maintain it in a dialectical relation with others, including paradigmatic or systemic understandings of the world by seeing it as a language or tool for dialogue.

Treated as a newer way of knowing, 'postmodernity' will be institutionalised, and the utility it has for a productive geography will be diluted. Such an understanding of 'postmodernism' will render 'postmodern' geography politically futile and reduce its own capabilities for dialogue within and amongst other fields of knowledge and knowing. Whereas understanding it as something which was always there in geographical thought, as a language and tool, as a movement, will make it come closer to other forms of knowing and seeing and reduce the otherwise inherent tensions it has produced. From this viewpoint, 'postmodern' geography no longer remains a diverse and bewildering project but a recognition and heralding of the already existing differences, and a democratic undertaking in which various knowledges can enter into a dialectical relationship.

'Postmodernism' undoubtedly provided a language for Geography that enabled it to rescue concealed differences from invisibility and the submergence of important differences (Cresswell, 2013). It can help human geography craft a newer form of enquiry open to difference, but one should not confuse the 'postmodern' movement with theory; the theory followed the de-essentializing politics of the 'postmodern' movement. A recognition of the problem of representation made theoretical intervention necessary, but the movement and the recognition were always there in geography. It developed in parallel with institutionalised geography. Hence, the question of how geography can be 'postmodern' is, in a way, a neglect of all that lies beyond institutional ways of knowing. 'Postmodern' theory made the language more democratic, but even before that, Geography was 'postmodern'; institutional geography was not. Geography entertained dialectics; it questioned power structures. It asserted geography to be introspective. As noted earlier, making deconstruction of primary importance is the project of 'postmodernity'. Geographical thought had always been deconstructive and always postmodern.

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