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What is This?
Between modernism and postmodernism

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I Introduction

In recent years geographers have undertaken a concerted engagement with critical social theory to gain some understanding of the rapidly changing geographies of modernity and postmodernity (Gregory, 1989; also see Bodman, 1991). One result of this engagement with social theory has been a resurgence of intradisciplinary debates regarding the value of various "theoretical" perspectives—many but not all of which centre on modern versus postmodern approaches (Curry, 1991; Pile and Rose, 1992). Indeed, the literature in this area of geography continues to expand rapidly (just a few recent examples of which include Cooke, 1990; Curry, 1991; 1992; Hannah and Strohmayer, 1992; Harvey, 1992; Marden, 1991; Pred, 1992, Strohmayer and Hannah, 1992). Moreover, geographers (Graham, 1990; 1992; Peet, 1992) and economists (Resnick and Wolff, 1992) have become embroiled in a debate concerning "anti-essentialist" Marxism, the primary arguments of which closely resemble those in the modernism–postmodernism debate.

Feminist geographers (e.g., Bondi, 1990; Massey, 1991; McDowell, 1992; Rose (in Pile and Rose, 1992)) have been quick to respond to the questions raised by postmodernism. They tend to be critical of both modernists and postmodernists for their failure to acknowledge gender issues and patriarchal approaches in the academy and thus, to paraphrase McDowell (1992; also see Christopherson, 1989), feminists are both inside and outside the projects of modernism and postmodernism. These authors also note, quite correctly, that feminists raised many of the issues central to this debate prior to or concomitant with the postmodernist movement in geography (see the reviews by McDowell, 1993a; 1993b).

My purpose in this article is to examine some of the questions raised by the modernism–postmodernism debates in geography. In so doing, I conclude that these debates have provided the impetus for important critiques of certain excesses of modernist theorizing and have increased sensitivity to space and place. However, I am concerned that the debate seems to be dominated by a construction of modernism and postmodernism as unified, monolithic essences situated in opposition to each other. I query the mapping of modernism and postmodernism as polar opposites, questioning whether most post-
modernism(s) are really that much different from the modernism(s) they purportedly supplant.

A key question I wish to address here, then, is whether certain postmodern discourses really provide some kind of complete break from modernist ones. This question is difficult to answer, yet I believe that some postmodernist discourses are much more closely related to modernist ones than some commentators (e.g., Lovering, 1989; Strohmayer and Hannah, 1992) have suggested. Indeed, I extend critiques of the modernist strains in postmodernism presented by Curry (1991) and Harvey (1992), arguing for my part that many postmodern discourses closely parallel the dualistic philosophy of Immanuel Kant that underlies most modernist discourse. I therefore submit that the modernism—postmodernism debate itself is based on a false dichotomy. This is not to suggest the debate is a waste of time, however, as the tension produced by the debate itself is responsible for many recent ‘advances’ in geographic theorizing. Indeed, this tension has constituted a large portion of the field of social geography in recent years.

However, some geographers (e.g., Jackson, 1993; McDowell, 1993b; Pile and Rose, 1992) are attempting to map new routes ‘around’, ‘beyond’, or ‘past’ the debate. Following their lead, this article is an attempt to find some position of ‘betweenness’ from which to engage with both modernist and postmodernist discourses. ‘Between’ is the best metaphor I can find to describe the positioning I wish to discuss but it does not completely capture the nuances of my project. Rather than conceiving this position of ‘betweenness’ as confined by epistemological barriers, then, it should be seen as dynamic and fluid, extending along the lines of tension, continuity and discontinuity between modernist and postmodernist discourses.

Such a position of betweenness becomes possible when it is recognized that certain postmodern and some modern discourses are more closely related than has been acknowledged to date. Although this point seems to have been lost in a debate that essentializes modernism and postmodernism as polar opposites, I would like to suggest that certain modernism(s) and postmodernism(s) fall next to each other on a continuum. Clearly, some forms of postmodernism (such as post-rationalism) are very different from some modernisms (such as logical positivism). However, other postmodernisms (like that espoused by Lyotard) are much more closely related to certain modernisms (like pragmatic humanism).

This article arises from my own attempts to make sense of Pakeha (European) discursive constructions of Maori people and Maori communities in nineteenth-century Aotearoa (New Zealand). In so doing, I have found many aspects of postmodern and post-structuralist discourses very fruitful in gaining at least a partial understanding of particular aspects of the relationship between power, knowledge and space in colonial Aotearoa. In particular, such discourses provide powerful conceptual tools for opposing certain theoretical excesses – such as ethnocentrism, androcentrism, universalism and abstraction (Haraway, 1988; 1991; Gregory, 1991; McDowell, 1992) – propagated in the name of Enlightenment rationality and modernist theory.

In the end, however, I still find it necessary to draw upon particular modernist metanarratives, such as ‘oppression’, ‘justice’ and ‘equity’ in order to make normative judgements about the historical geographies of Pakeha and Maori. Haraway (1988; 1991), in attempting to theorize a feminist objectivity, has grappled with similar problems and I think her comments aptly summarize my own perspective.

So, I think my problem, and ‘our’ problem, is how to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic
technologies for making meanings and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world, one that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earthwide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness (1991: 187, original emphasis).

This quotation might suggest to some that Haraway may have some ‘grand’ theoretical project in mind, but I do not think that is the case. Similarly, my purpose should not be seen as an attempt to replace old ‘grand’ theory with new; instead it should be viewed as a much smaller project involving an attempt to reconcile my own beliefs in material reality with my beliefs about the power of discourse in structuring that ‘reality’. This article is thus an exploration of the potential for constructing some sort of situated and embodied (see Johnson, 1989) writing position located in the terrain ‘between’ modernist and postmodernist discourses. Some might accuse me of attempting to ‘domesticate postmodernism’ (Strohmayer and Hannah, 1992) or looking for a ‘successor science’ (Harding, 1986). That may be the case, but in the end I hope my approach might result in a conceptualization of the historical geography of nineteenth-century Aotearoa that is more sensitive to aspects of the lived geographies of Maori and Pakeha people. Perhaps it may also assist others in their own attempts to find a situated, embodied and therefore accountable writing position.

The article proceeds along the following lines. I first present an introductory summary of postmodernism(s) in geography, focusing on the crisis of representation and the problem of subjectivity highlighted by postmodernism(s). This is followed with a brief discussion of what I see to be some of the ‘positive’ impacts postmodernism(s) (or at least the tensions between modernism and postmodernism) have had on geographic thinking. Although not explicit, this section is as much a recognition of certain excesses of modernist discourses as it is a review of what I consider to be the ‘positive’ in postmodern ones. I turn then to focus on the modernist overtones in certain postmodernism(s). I review other writers’ recent critiques of such modernist overtones, then discuss the postmodern reliance on a (modernist) Kantian foundation for a supposedly nonfoundational knowledge. I follow with a brief discussion of the binary logic which results in the dyadic construction of the modernism–postmodernism debate. My purpose is not to find some spurious reason to dismiss postmodernism(s), but merely to point out the possibility that some versions of postmodernism may not be so radically different from modernist discourses. This leads to a discussion of the possibility for developing a writing position ‘between’ modernism and postmodernism – a position from which one might avoid the temptation for taking sides, or the ‘will to power’ involved in trying to ‘win’ this particular academic debate.

My purpose in the following section is to summarize the hegemonic conceptualization of postmodernism. It is important to acknowledge that there are many different types of postmodernism and any attempt to summarize (or ‘represent’) these different approaches may itself be fraught with problems.

II Postmodernism, representation and subjectivity

Philo (Cloke et al., 1991: 170) notes two aspects to the postmodern phenomenon in human geography: postmodernism as object and postmodernism as attitude. Similarly, Dear (1988) and subsequently Curry (1991) describe three related aspects of postmodernism: style, epoch and method. Philo’s postmodernism as object is closely related to Dear’s postmodernism as style and epoch. In this regard, postmodernism is viewed by some observers as an object of study, and such study has revealed a change in both the style and
epoch of contemporary society. According to Curry (1991: 214), the ‘somber, univocal, and timeless face’ of modernist style has been replaced by the ‘irony and historical illusion’ of postmodernist style. In the arts, for example, postmodernists have collapsed the high-art/mass-art dualism characteristic of high modernism; in so doing they have embraced the kitsch and pastiche formerly associated only with ‘pop’ art.

It is worth noting, however, that some theorists are somewhat sceptical of the notion that these cultural practices actually form part of some clean break with the past. Jameson’s (1984) reference to postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism is perhaps the most oft-cited case. A more recent example can be found in Thomas’s (1991: 21) observation that ‘the erosion of the distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture . . . was central to Bartok’s use of folk themes and dances in otherwise “avant garde” pieces such as the Piano Concertos and Concerto for Orchestra’. Gregory (1991: 37, note 7) echoes this sentiment, suggesting that ‘postmodernism can be seen as affecting a break with high modernism but simultaneously maintaining a deep affinity with an earlier, essentially fin de siècle modernism’. Calhoun (1993: 78) suggests that postmodernism is a recognizable artistic and cultural trend reacting against modernism, but ‘this is not the same as saying modernity has given way to postmodernity’. Even Lyotard (1984b: 79), a supposed bastion of postmodern sensibility, suggests that postmodernism ‘is undoubtedly a part of the modern’.

Possibly most significant, however, is Thomas’s (1991: 21) questioning of ‘the compulsion to register certain cultural strategies as singular to one time or global phase rather than as possibilities which existed at a number of times’. Part of the answer clearly lies in the power relationships which inhere in hegemonic modes of inquiry that are policed by their own ‘will to truth’. As Haraway (1988: 580) observes, traditional science has tended to be both reductionist and masculinist in nature, usually involving ‘a search for translation, convertibility, mobility of meanings, and universality’ (also see Le Doeff (1987) regarding the philosophical roots of masculinism, and Rose (1992) for a discussion of masculinism in geography). Such reductionism leads to the need to classify and order the world, thereby mapping it into ‘our’ (European, ‘white’, bourgeois, male?) universalist preconceptions.

Regardless of one’s position concerning postmodern style, there are those who regard it, in turn, as one facet of a new postmodern epoch, where the old ‘rules’ no longer apply (Beatson, 1990). Capitalist production and accumulation, once characterized by mass production (Fordism) and scientific management (Taylorism), is said to have shifted to a mode of ‘flexible accumulation’ characterized by post-Fordist, après-Fordist or neo-Fordist production (Jameson, 1984; Harvey, 1989; Soja, 1989; McDowell, 1991). Perhaps more significantly, former boundaries between such phenomena as the ‘economic’ and the ‘social’ (see, e.g., Gregson, 1992), ‘art’ and ‘science’, ‘illusion’ and ‘reality’, have ostensibly become much less well defined as modernist distinctions ‘collapse into one another’ (Beatson, 1990: 132).

In many instances, the study of postmodernism as object has been undertaken by modernist geographers (e.g., Harvey, 1989; Soja, 1989) who explicate postmodernist style and epoch from a modernist perspective. However, there are those (e.g., Strohmayer and Hannah, 1992) who espouse a different approach, one which corresponds to Philo’s postmodern attitude and Dear’s postmodern method. Postmodernism as attitude or method is not so much about developing a particular theoretical standpoint as it is about adopting a specific epistemology. In fact, the sometimes used term ‘postmodern theory’ is a contradiction in terms, since ‘theory’ is a form of essentialism (Graham, 1990) and
postmodernism is, ostensibly, an anti-essentialist (or anti-foundational) epistemology (Calhoun, 1993). Perhaps it might be more appropriate to borrow Gregory’s (1991: 18) conceptualization of theory as a ‘series of discourses’ when speaking of postmodernism. In that way, its embeddedness in social life and its multiple identities are clearly visible, but perhaps more importantly it can be seen as ‘an intervention in social life’ (Gregory, 1991: 18) rather than merely a commentary upon it.

Certain postmodernists are deeply suspicious of essentialism, ‘grand theories’, ‘metanarratives’ or ‘totalizing discourses’ such as capitalism, progress and the Enlightenment (and by implication specific Enlightenment epistemological approaches such as Hegel’s dialectic, Marx’s historical materialism or Popper’s scientific rationalism). Indeed, Lyotard (1984a: xxiv) defines postmodernism as ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’. In a more thorough-going (but perhaps less influential) discussion, Flax (1990) provides a more fitting summary of the postmodernist project. In this regard she outlines six ‘subjects of conversation’ that postmodernists find particularly important to examine:

(1) contemporary Western culture – its nature and the best ways to understand it; (2) knowledge – what it is, who or what constructs and generates it, and its relations to power; (3) philosophy – its crisis and history, how both are to be understood, and how (if at all) it is to be practiced; (4) power – if, where, and how domination exists and is maintained and how and if it can be overcome; (5) subjectivity and the self – how our concepts and experiences of them have come to be and what, if anything, these do or can mean; and (6) difference – how to conceptualize, preserve, or rescue it (Flax, 1990: 188).

Postmodernism(s) arise in part from the growing recognition of what is now termed the ‘crisis of representation’ in the ‘human sciences’ (Marcus and Fischer, 1986; also see Jackson, 1991; Hannah and Strohmayer, 1992; Strohmayer and Hannah, 1992); although Bauman (1988: 219; also see Folch-Serra, 1989; Jackson, 1993) perceptively refers also to a ‘status crisis’ among intellectuals, who are no longer certain of their ability to provide ‘an authoritative solution to the questions of cognitive truth, moral judgement and aesthetic taste’. Interestingly, this ‘crisis’ appears to be both gendered and racialized, as few women or people of colour have occupied positions of status from which they might suffer such a crisis (hooks, 1990). Nevertheless, the crisis of representation is central to most postmodern discourse, and it is therefore worth reviewing in more detail.

1 The crisis of representation

Strohmayer and Hannah (1992) provide one of the most cogent arguments to date for the adoption of (one form of) postmodern epistemology by geographers. They focus ‘on the most potentially destructive, and hence most carefully avoided problems brought to light by such writers as Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida’ (p. 30). In this, they are speaking of the ‘crisis of representation’ that has arisen as a result of poststructuralist writers’ exposure of the supposed ‘groundlessness of “truth” and . . . “right”’ (p. 30). Strohmayer and Hannah here appear to conflate postmodernism with poststructuralism, yet postmodernism(s) have roots in other intellectual traditions including situationism (DeBord, 1983; also see Bonnet, 1989), feminism (Massey, 1991; 1993b) and Dewey’s pragmatism (Rorty, 1979). They also tend to concentrate on the purely linguistic aspects of the crisis of representation, although other geographers have more directly related this crisis to the experience of time and space. Harvey, for example, links the crisis of representation to what he calls ‘time-space compression’ where

... the time horizons of both private and public decision-making have shrunk, while satellite communication and declining transport costs have made it increasingly possible to spread those decisions immediately over an ever wider and variegated space (Harvey, 1989: 147).
For Gregory (1991), this spatial crisis of representation can also be found during the period of early modernism. Citing Jameson (1984), he argues that by the early twentieth century a radical new relation between space and place had developed, one where ‘the truth of daily experience no longer coincided with the place in which it takes place’ (Gregory, 1991: 17).

Nevertheless, for Derrida, and later Barthes, all knowledge is a social creation, and thus truth – based as it is on such socially created knowledge – becomes in itself just another human creation (Bannet, 1989; Milner, 1991). Much of the poststructuralist argument concerning the status of truth centres on language because of ‘the realization/belief that language lies at the heart of all knowledge’ (Dear, 1988: 266). Thus postmodern philosophers like Lyotard (1984a) find the notion that we can represent reality through our language makes no sense whatsoever. The same can be said of the neopragmatist philosophy of Rorty (1979), for whom there is no ‘reality’ prior to language. Such incredulity towards notions of truth arises from the paradoxes and internal contradictions of language exposed by deconstruction, which in turn has intellectual roots in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (Strohmayer and Hannah, 1992: 36).

According to this line of reasoning, Wittgenstein long ago laid bare the question of representation which now lies at the root of all postmodernisms (Strohmayer and Hannah, 1992). This question arises out of his quest to understand the relationship between signifier (language, text, sign) and signified (reality). In this regard, Wittgenstein demonstrated that ‘the nominal possibility of a demonstrable identity between signifier and signified is itself derivative of repetition, rather than the other way around’ (Strohmayer and Hannah, 1992: 35). This revelation calls into question any claims about reality, since such claims are not the reality to which they are supposed to refer. Accordingly, for some postmodernists, the idea(l) that shared language (e.g., a definition) reflects a shared reality is an article of faith which unfortunately can only be ‘substantiated’ in more language and thus not really substantiated at all. The truth of any statement, scientific or otherwise, which ultimately must rely on some anchoring in order to avoid being completely arbitrary, is undecidable. This in turn does not imply that there is no truth, but rather that if there is, we are incapable of pinning it down (Strohmayer and Hannah, 1992: 36, original emphasis).

Thus, as I shall expand upon later, Kant’s (1922) dualism between reality (noumena, or ‘things in themselves’) and our concepts of reality (phenomena, or ‘what we can know of things’) – long the foundation of positivist, humanist and scientific Marxist geographic work (cf. Livingstone and Harrison, 1991) – is maintained in (Hannah and Strohmayer’s brand of) postmodernism.

2 Loss of the subject

Closely related to the crisis of representation is the suspicion of any concept of self or subjectivity not understood as produced by discursive practices (Bannet, 1989; Flax, 1990; Milner, 1991). Some postmodernists, because of their opposition to notions of a transcendental and ahistorical ‘humanity’, hold strong anti-humanist views. According to Patton (1991), suspicion of modernist notions of subjectivity arises from Derrida’s (1979) reading of Nietzsche’s metaphysics of appearance, in which Being exists only in masks and further masks. This is closely related to Nietzsche’s ‘transvaluation of values’ whereby all values – including truth, goodness and subjectivity – are exposed as inherently unstable appearances (Pascal, 1957: xiii). Thus, for poststructuralists like Patton (1991: 32), ‘there is no truth of Being as such, no truth of man or indeed of woman. In reality, as in
Nietzsche's own text, there are only interpretations or *appearances*. A more accessible version of 'the problem of the subject' is provided by Hannah and Strohmayer (1992: 309), who explicitly link the crisis of representation and the loss of the subject:

> Since we realize that we are neither completely in control of our language nor capable of determining to what extent we are not, . . . our work must now attend without hope of legitimation not only to its objects but also to its subjects (ellipsis in original; emphasis added).

Similarly, Foucault argues that history must account for the constitution of subjects as well as of knowledge (Driver, 1992). For him there is no possibility of the transcendental subject. Indeed, as Foucault observed in an oft-quoted interview in *Skyline* (1982: 18), 'nothing is fundamental. That is what is interesting in the analysis of society'. Thus, for some postmodernists (and poststructuralists) human subjects are complex amalgams, multiple rather than unitary, and produced by the mutually constitutive web of social structures, practices, discourses and subjectivity (Davies, 1991). Human subjects are not the result of some universal human essence.

Many feminist theorists have been grappling with the question of subjectivity for some time now – primarily in response to androcentric constructions of human subjectivity that are really overgeneralizations from the experiences of (European, 'white', bourgeois) male subjects. Fuss (1989), Flax (1990) and, more recently, Rose (1991) suggest that, in contrast to the one-sided constructionist argument of some postmodernists, subjectivity might better be theorized as both essential and constructed. This may merely be a subtle shift in emphasis, but for me the result is a more sensitive mapping of subjectivity as the result of multiple, overlapping and recursive relations between such phenomena as Self and Other, psyche and text, agency and discourse. But what does this all mean for geography?

### III (Postmodern) implications for geography

Postmodernism(s) have clearly affected geographical research, and while some might dismiss them (e.g., Lovering, 1989), I suggest their impact on the discipline has been valuable. The following brief discussion, which follows Flax's (1990) enumeration of the movement’s key ‘subjects of conversation’, outlines some of what I see to be the positive impacts postmodern discourses have had on the discipline. The discussion is by no means complete (nor closed to contestation) – such an endeavour may not be possible, nor desirable. The focus is on the postmodern debate in general rather than the work of postmodern geographers specifically. Furthermore, I do not imply that the geographers or others whose works are cited in this section are postmodernists (although some might be). Instead I suggest that their work has been both informed and transformed by the tension between modernist and postmodernist discourses. Finally, and most importantly, implicit in the discussion is a recognition of certain shortcomings or excesses in modernist theoretical and empirical approaches in geography.

Postmodern discourses have increased geographers’ sensitivity to issues relating to culture – in particular to the relations between contemporary western culture and nonwestern Others (e.g., Anderson, 1987; 1988; 1991; Jackson, 1992; Pawson, 1992). Thus geographers have become much more reflexive regarding the politics inherent in their own attempts at ‘representing’ nonwesterners and racialized Others in their writing (see, e.g., Crang, 1992; Katz, 1992; Keith, 1992; Rogers, 1992; but see my critique (Berg,
of the persistence of certain types of 'racial' representations in geography). The increased interest in 'culture' is also exemplified by the decision of members of the Social Geography Study Group of the Institute of British Geographers to become the 'Social and Cultural Geography Study Group'. Ostensibly, the postmodern emphasis on the politics of difference has also opened spaces within the academy, albeit small ones, for marginalized 'Others' (particularly nonwesterners, women, children and people of colour) to speak against dominant (western, 'white', masculine) discourses (Young, 1990), although McDowell (1992) comments on the absence of gender in postmodernist analyses (also see Flax, 1990: 210–16). In fact, it is probably fair to conclude that feminists and feminist theory have had much more to do with awakening academics to exclusion of the Other through their universalizing and masculinist tendencies than has postmodernism (see, e.g., Christopherson, 1989; McDowell, 1992; Rose, 1992). Nevertheless, it is plausible to suggest some versions of postmodernism have had some impact in this area. Postmodern discourses also involve a greater sensitivity to 'forms of knowledge' – what they are, who or what constructs and generates them, and their relations to power (e.g., Foucault, 1978; 1980) – with a resultant increased awareness of the positionality and situatedness of knowledge (Pile, 1991; Barnes and Duncan, 1992; Harvey, 1992; Marcus, 1992; Pratt, 1992; Jackson, 1991; 1993). The debate within geography concerning postmodernism(s) has led to an interest in philosophical perspectives new to geography – including poststructuralism (Strohmayer and Hannah, 1992) and psychoanalytic theory (Jackson, 1989; Pile, 1991). At the very least, in order to engage in the discussion at all, those from all sides of the debate have been forced somewhat to re-examine the philosophical foundations of their own positions in relation to those of their 'adversaries'.

Questions of power have been central to so-called 'radical' approaches that (re)emerged in geography during the early 1970s. Postmodernism(s) have contributed greatly to alternative understandings of relations of power (Driver, 1985; 1992). 'Power' has been reconceptualized as existing everywhere, inscribed in all social relations. The focus, however, has been on where and how domination exists, how it is maintained and how (if at all) it can be bypassed – but perhaps most importantly, postmodern discourses have shifted the gaze of the academy in upon itself (see, e.g., Barnes, 1992; McDowell, 1992; Marcus, 1992). One key question focuses on the relationship between power and knowledge. As Foucault (1980: 66) observes,

"Science, the constraint to truth, the obligation of truth and ritualized procedures for its production have traversed absolutely the whole of Western society for millennia and are now so universalized as to become the general law for all civilizations. What is the history of this 'will to truth'? What are its effects? How is all this interwoven with relations of power?"

While I disagree with Foucault's ethnocentric assertion that science has become 'the general law for all civilizations', there is no refuting Foucault's impact on geographic examination of the space–power–knowledge nexus (see, e.g., Driver, 1990; Philo, 1989). Examples of work undertaken in this vein include examination of the power relations underlying such taken-for-granted aspects of geographic work as maps (e.g., Harley, 1988; 1989; Pickles, 1992), and geographers' own texts (e.g., Sayer, 1988; 1989; Crush, 1991; Crang, 1992; Keith, 1992; McDowell, 1992; Olsson, 1992).

Perhaps of key importance to geography has been the postmodernist emphasis on space which has, as Soja (1989) suggests, allowed for 'the reassertion of space in critical social theory'. The work of Foucault (1972, 1977, 1980) is most often cited in this regard (see, e.g., Soja, 1989; Driver, 1985; 1992; Philo, 1992). Geertz's (1983) 'local knowledge' has
also been a source of inspiration, especially concerning the rising interest in the locale – and the attendant ‘locality debate’ (see, e.g., Cooke, 1987a; 1987b; Smith, 1987; Beauregard, 1988; Lovering, 1989; Howitt, 1992). The melding of spatial sensitivity and social theory, concomitant with the rise of postmodernism, has also seen more critical examination of both the region (e.g., Murphy, 1991) and geographical scale in general (e.g., Howitt, 1993).

Clearly some geographers, particularly feminists but also some so-called ‘radicals’, have always been sensitive to the issues outlined above, but I suggest that postmodern discourses have increased the overall level of awareness of these issues among geographers. This is not to imply that there is no need for increased sensitivity on the part of geographers, as feminist geographers so cogently argue (e.g., McDowell, 1992; Rose, 1991; 1992). None the less, it is not implausible to suggest that at least a proportion of those social geographers involved in emancipatory social science for the most part now depict their subjects (and objects) of study in a more variable, context-sensitive fashion than was previously the norm. If for this reason only, postmodernism(s) have thus had a significant impact on geography – one which has overdetermined or irrevocably changed the discourse of geography (on overdetermination theory, see Graham, 1990).

This brief review has obviously missed many salient points, but none the less asserts my belief that postmodernist discourses have had, and continue to have, a ‘positive’ influence on the discipline. It also presents an implicit critique of some of the shortcomings of modernist geographies. Unlike some commentators who, as Strohmayer and Hannah (1992) suggest, dismiss postmodernism out of hand, I acknowledge its significance for geography. Nevertheless, in so doing I cannot ignore certain problematic aspects of the way postmodernism has been framed in the current debate; I am speaking now about the way ‘it’ is conceptualized as a radical break from modernist discourse.

IV Modernist overtones in postmodern discourse

Curry’s critique of the modernist strains in postmodernism (Curry, 1991) has already provided what postmodernists Hannah and Strohmayer (1992: 308) refer to as ‘a timely and important contribution to the hitherto dilettante debates about postmodernism within geography . . . ’ (but see Pred’s (1992) angry response). Curry (1991) concludes that in spite of postmodernists’ claims to see the world, and our knowledge of it, in a radically new fashion – as more complex, relativistic and variable than the modernist view – their geographies seem little different from those of modernists. Thus, like their modernist counterparts, postmodern geographers continue to maintain an ‘authorial presence, where the author claims ultimate control over the text, which for that reason lies outside of time, as a timeless commentary on a society that is itself ensnared in the logic of epochal change’ (Curry, 1991: 223).

Harvey (1992; also see 1989) exposes a fundamental paradox in certain types of postmodernism. Postmodernists, Harvey observes, continue to deploy truth terms of their own – indicating their continued belief in an ultimate line of truth they theoretically claim cannot exist. This paradox reminds Harvey (1992: 322) of William Blake’s great aphorism ‘“to generalize is to be an idiot; to particularize is to achieve the greatest distinction of merit”, which sounds great (particularly to geographers) until it is recognized as a generalization and therefore self-condemned as idiotic’. Perhaps Harvey’s account of postmodernism is a bit of a caricature, yet he certainly points out a most problematic
aspect of certain forms of postmodern discourse, namely a self-refuting truth claim regarding the groundlessness of all truth claims.

I wish to extend in a slightly different direction the critiques of postmodernism presented by Curry (1991) and Harvey (1992). In this respect I shall focus my discussion on some postmodernists’ reliance on a Kantian foundational knowledge for a supposedly nonfoundational epistemology. Before doing so I wish to point out my purpose is not to dismiss postmodernism, but instead to point out the possibility that certain types of postmodernism do not break radically from modernism.

1 Kantian foundations

Immanuel Kant’s influence on geography – particularly his views on the nature of the discipline elucidated in his lecture course on physical geography presented at the University of Königsberg from 1756 to 1796 – has long been acknowledged in geography (Livingstone and Harrison, 1981; see, e.g., Hartshorne, 1939). Kant, who died in 1804, is also generally considered one of the most influential modern philosophers (Russell, 1946), but with few exceptions (e.g., Livingstone and Harrison, 1981) geographers have only just begun to discuss Kant’s contribution to wider philosophical issues and their implications for geography. This situation is regrettable, for Kant’s work forms the philosophical basis of most approaches in the discipline. His dualistic philosophy can be seen as the foundation of logical positivist philosophies underpinning quantitative-theoretical geography, subjectivist philosophies at the root of humanistic geography, and the analytical approaches underlying ‘scientific’ Marxist geography (I refer here to the structuralist and analytic approaches associated with writers such as Althusser (1970), not ‘humanistic’ Marxism, underpinned by Hegel’s (1931) dialectic, and associated with writers such as LeFebvre (1991)). As Livingstone and Harrison (1981: 361) observe, ‘Kant, it seems, has fathered both idiographic and nomothetic, idealist and positivist geography’. I suggest that Kant’s dualistic philosophy forms the foundation for certain types of postmodern geography as well – a foundation that places these postmodern discourses much closer to modernist ones than some postmodernists might admit.

One key to the connection between postmodern geography and Kant’s philosophy is the dualism he outlined in his Critique of pure reason. It is here he argued that what we might refer to as the material world causes only ‘matter of sensation’; our own mental concepts order this sense-matter by supplying the concepts by which we understand experience (Russell, 1946: 734). In Kant’s own words:

Appearances, so far as they are thought as objects under the unity of the categories, are called phenomena. But if I admit things which are the objects of the understanding only, and nevertheless can be given as objects of intuition, though not of sensuous intuition (as cora intuitu intellectuali), such things would be called Noumena (intelligibilia) (Kant, 1922: 203, original emphasis).

Here Kant makes the distinction between our concepts of reality (phenomena, or ‘what we can know of things’) and reality (noumena, or ‘things in themselves’). Thus for Kant (1922: 204; my emphasis), ‘through the empirical use of our understanding we know things only as they appear.’

There are clear parallels between Kant’s subjective idealism and the radical relativism espoused by postmodernists such as Strohmayer and Hannah (1992: 36), who suggest that ‘if there is [truth], we are incapable of pinning it down’. Both acknowledge the potential of a truth or reality (Kant’s noumena), but assert that we cannot know it. For Kant, we can know only our ‘concepts of reality’ (phenomena); for some postmodernists, we can know
only our ‘representations of reality’ (language). Despite its claims to be nonfounding, certain postmodernist epistemology bears a striking resemblance to a Kantian philosophical foundation developed more than 200 years ago. Yet, just as some postmodernists are silent about the truth status of their assertions of the groundlessness of truth claims, they also appear unable to acknowledge the foundational character of their supposedly nonfounding epistemology. One might well ask why this is so?

2 Binary logic and false dichotomies

I suggest that the modernism–postmodernism debate, at least as it has been constructed in geography, is based on a false dichotomy. Binary oppositions such as ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’ are, as Crush (1991: 398) observes, ‘the most effective way of forcing choice’. I do not wish to imply that the modernism–postmodernism dualism results from the intentional actions of participants in the debate. Instead, I suggest this dualism is the inevitable consequence of an Aristotelian logic of identity which involves abstracting things from their context as a means of overlaying some form of order on to a messy world.

Hartsock (1987: 194; also see Young, 1990: 98–99) outlines three principles of concern here: ‘the principle of identity (If anything is A, it is A), the principle of contradiction (Nothing can be both A and not-A), and the principle of the excluded middle (Anything and everything must be either A or not-A)’. Under this formal logic, then, one is forced to conceptualize the ‘somewhat different’ as the ‘absolutely other’ – modernism and postmodernism become two completely different phenomena. I suggest an alternative conception of identity logic – grounded in a dialectical and contextual approach founded by Hegel (1931) and revised by Marx – where it is recognized that all things are identifiable only in relation to their context (identity is comprised of both what a thing is and what it is not, or A = A + not-A). Such a conception acknowledges that people can only know what a thing is by setting their concept of it in relation to their concepts of what a thing is not (for example, the way geographers unconsciously identify a ‘locale’ in relation to its regional, national and global context). It also acknowledges that phenomena are part of ongoing processes rather than ‘things’ which can be easily measured and quantified. Utilizing such a dialectical and contextual logic of identity, some postmodernist discourses cannot be seen as completely separate from modernist ones, but are identifiable as phenomena entirely dependent upon modernism for their identity. Clearly, some more radical forms of postmodernism are very different from some modernist discourses. However these postmodernisms must be seen in context, as related to other postmodernisms that more closely resemble modernisms. This notion might seem self-evident, especially given the term postmodernism itself, but it seems to have been lost in a debate that essentializes modernism and postmodernism as unified essences which form polar opposites.

Another possible reason for the binary construction of the debate may lay in a confusion between what Locke refers to as ‘real’ and ‘nominal’ essences:

Real essence connotes the Aristotelian understanding of essence as that which is most irreducible and unchanging about a thing; nominal essence signifies for Locke, a classificatory fiction we need to categorize and to label. Real essences are discovered by close empirical observation; nominal essences are not discovered so much as assigned or produced – produced specifically by language (Fuss, 1989: 4–5).

I suggest that modernism and postmodernism are constructed in other geographic discourse as ‘real’ essences (absolutely and irreducibly different), when they might more
appropriately be characterized as 'nominal' essences (assigned 'difference' for purposes of
the debate, as I have done in this article).

V  Potential for writing from 'between'

So what does the identification of Kantian dualisms and binary identity logic have to do
with (post)modern geographies? Perhaps they are not such important revelations on their
own, but when taken in concert with other evidence of modernist strains in postmodern-
ism outlined by writers such as Harvey (1989; 1992) and Curry (1991), I suggest they
indicate that (certain) postmodernisms are not so radically different from (certain)
modernisms. This possibility in turn opens up space for a writing position 'between'
modernism and postmodernism; for if they are not radically opposed one might borrow
freely from both perspectives without treading on epistemologically unsafe ground. But
how might one map out such a writing position?

My own answer to this question involves adherence to what might be termed a 'situated'
and 'embodied' approach to understanding my subjects and objects of research. Such an
approach owes much to the objective idealism of the 'early' Marx (although I am not
suggesting it is Marxist), and recent feminist theorizing about objectivity and partial
knowledges (e.g., Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1988; 1991; Bhavnani, 1993).

Marx accepted that human ideas are the result of sensory transactions between the
human brain and a knowable material world. But Marx and subsequent Marxists have
been criticized, particularly by feminists, for their tendency towards universalism and
essentialism (Harding, 1986). For some feminists, however, the answer to the problem of
universalism is not the particularism inherent in the radical relativism of postmodern
discourses. Indeed, certain feminists are very concerned about the implications such
relativism might have for their own emancipatory projects.

McDowell (1992) is concerned with the failure on the part of postmodernists (and here
she refers to 'them' as a unified and single essence) to acknowledge the power relations
inherent in 'difference'. She is clearly in favour of moves towards greater recognition of
difference, diversity, contextuality, specificity and positionality – moves originating in both
feminism and postmodernism (see, e.g., Flax, 1987; Haraway, 1988). Unlike feminism,
however, some postmodernism(s) do not provide a route for opposing oppressive power
relations underlying relations of difference. As a feminist, McDowell (1992: 70) is
concerned to ensure geographers do not forget that ‘differences are hierarchically ranked
and that cultural variation is the product of material and historical structures of power and
exploitation’. Similarly, Hartsock (1987) notes the need to work to transform oppressive power
relations, not ignore or resist them as postmodernists do (again she essentializes
postmodernists). She argues this involves accounting for one’s own position as subject and
object of history, accepting that systematic knowledge of the world is possible, and
developing from theories and experiences plans for changing the world. Haraway is
perhaps more scathing, but her focus is not ‘postmodernism’ but instead relativism. She
argues that it

... is the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity; both deny the stakes in location,
embodiment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well. Relativism and totalization are both 'god
tricks' promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully . . . (1988: 584).

Building on the work of Harding (1986), Haraway’s (1988: 581) response to questions
about relativism and totalization is to espouse a doctrine of 'embodied objectivity' or
situated knowledges’. Embodiment in this sense means to give a tangible, concrete or ‘bodily’ form to an otherwise abstract concept (see Johnson, 1989). Most research (including my own) has been undertaken from an abstract ‘disembodied’ perspective, as if the researcher was floating above the world of ‘his’ (I use this strategically) research objects. Indeed, only unsituated and disembodied researchers can commit themselves to mobile positioning and passionate detachment, but only at the expense of maintaining impossibly naive identity politics and epistemologies (Haraway, 1988). On the other hand, situated and embodied researchers are locatable, responsible and therefore answerable and accountable for what they (learn to) see and how they (learn to) describe it. In this way, ‘... objectivity and truth come to be seen as concepts which are historically situated and situationally specific’ (Bhavnani, 1993: 96; also see both Jackson’s (1993) and McDowell’s (1993b) discussions of situated knowledges). They are not impartial or disembodied, nor are they transcendent. The purpose of such research is thus to produce neither totalizations nor refractory particularisms but rather objective, partial knowledges. But what might the mechanics of such situated research look like and how might one acquire partial knowledges?

Bhavnani (1993), extending Haraway’s project, outlines her own procedure for undertaking situated research and achieving partial knowledges. She is especially interested to outline a ‘feminist objectivity’, but I have found her approach useful as a template for my own anti-racist perspective. Bhavnani (1993: 97) suggests there are three key elements to Haraway’s conception of situated objectivity: accountability, positioning and partiality. These key elements raise three questions for the researcher: ‘Are the researched re-inscribed into prevailing notions of powerlessness?; Are the micropolitics of the research relationship discussed?; and How are questions of difference engaged with?’ (Bhavnani, 1993: 98). I shall discuss each in turn.

First, Haraway’s insistence on accountability implies that research should not reproduce or reinscribe the researched in ways that they are already represented by dominant society. In other words, ‘the analyses can not be complicit with dominant representations which reinscribe inequality’ (Bhavnani, 1993: 98). Accordingly, while my own research focuses primarily on Pakeha, I nevertheless need to be wary of reproducing Maori people as passive victims of European colonization. Thus I am careful to outline the ways they both resisted and domesticated the colonization process to their own ends. Likewise, it is important to avoid reproducing ‘Maori’ and ‘Pakeha’ as unitary (‘good’ and ‘bad’ respectively) essences. (Indeed, part of my work examines the way Maori have been constituted as an essentialized ‘racial’ group.) Secondly, the ‘politics of position’ outlined by Haraway make it necessary for the researcher both to reflect critically and discuss in depth the micropolitics of the research process. In other words, what are the relationships of domination and subordination negotiated by the researcher, and how are they discussed in the dissemination of research findings? These questions are very important, since

... the power of the researcher in relation to the researched – a set of power relationships which are bounded by the imperatives of resource availability – can define the parameters of the theoretical framework, can control the design of the study, and can inform how the study is conducted, analysed, and written up (Bhavnani, 1993: 101).

Many researchers now acknowledge their position, but Bhavnani’s argument is that researchers must go much further, not only noting their position but also analysing its implications for their research (also see Jackson, 1993). This is difficult terrain to negotiate, as researchers are generally multiply positioned. For example, I am now anti-racist, yet I grew up in a small community in British Columbia, Canada (see Anderson,
1991, on racial discourse in British Columbia), where I was actively involved in the production and reproduction of racial discourses. I now support indigenous land rights, yet my home and the institution I study at are situated on raupatu (confiscated) Maori land. There are many more overlapping and conflicting positions I could outline, but it is important not only to list them but also to analyse the way they might affect my own partial knowledges. In this regard, I suggest my multiple positioning provides me with certain opportunities for understanding the anatomy of racism from the inside. This becomes particularly important when attempting to (de)construct historical texts written by Pakeha New Zealanders. The third issue arises from Haraway's concern for partiality and difference. In this regard, Bhavnani (1993) asks how the questions of difference are dealt with in the design, conduct, write-up and dissemination of the research? She suggests (p. 102) the researcher must be sensitive to the difference of interests of those under study. Here again, this is difficult to operationalize, but I attempt to do so in my own work by paying particular attention to the material reasons for the discontinuities of experience and identities of those under scrutiny. Neither Maori nor Pakeha people should be categorized as belonging to unified groups. Class, ethnic and gender differences crosscut both groups in highly complex ways. In the case of Maori for example, iwi (tribe), and hapu (subtribe) identities may be circumscribed by particular whanau (extended family), class and gender relationships. These in turn must be placed in the wider context of relations with Pakeha New Zealanders.

VI Conclusion

Clearly, the modernism–postmodernism debate has had a significant impact on human geography. Like previous intellectual debates in the discipline (e.g., quantitative v. regional, humanistic v. quantitative, or ‘radical’ v. humanistic), the one involving postmodernism(s) has spurred vigorous discussion about the nature of geographic inquiry – what the focus of such inquiry should be, and how ‘we’ should (or can) carry out our investigations. While some might see such debate as damaging, I prefer to view it as a necessary exercise in reflection, without which geography would be greatly impoverished. Indeed, I think that the postmodern challenge, as Dear (1988) has termed it, is at least partially responsible for geographers’ increasing engagement with critical social theory (be it modernist or postmodernist) and thus their entry into what might be termed the mainstream of social sciences.

On the other hand, the hegemonic representation of the debate between modernism and postmodernism constructs the two perspectives as unitary, monolithic and opposed essences. Such a construction offers little hope of reconciling the postmodernist rejection of all grand narratives with emancipatory desires for normative discourse. I have suggested in this article, however, that some postmodernisms may not differ so radically from the modernisms they supposedly replace. I have extended the critiques of modernist overtones in postmodernism suggesting that (modernist) Kantian foundations underlie some postmodernist discourses. Some postmodernism(s) might thus be better conceptualized as occupying various adjacent points on a spectrum, rather than opposite poles. This in turn opens up the potential for a writing position between modernism and postmodernism. I have suggested one possible means of mapping such a position, grounded in the objective idealism of the early Marx as well as feminist theories of situated, embodied and partial knowledges. There are probably many other options for working within both modernist
and postmodernist discourses – such as the approaches of postcolonial theorists like Spivak (1987) and Trinh (1989). The key point to remember is that such perspectives are neither totalizing nor particularizing; instead they might just offer the potential for gaining a perspective of something from somewhere.

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