

A Socialist Feminist Perspective on Gender and Environment

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Rewriting geography “with the women in it” has been going on for some time now. This process has produced a diversity of literature which reflects a diversity of theoretical perspectives.² Recent discussions are nevertheless unified by two underlying themes which are extending the theoretical capability and vitality of feminist work in the discipline. First, feminist research in geography is not “just” about women. It is about the ways in which gender forms an essential parameter of human environmental relations. Second feminist research in geography is not “just” an empirical study. Rewriting geography “with the gender relations in it” – incorporating an androgynous [both female and male] human into human-environmental relations – is as much a process of methodological and conceptual rectification as it is of addressing new empirical questions.³

These two related themes are most apparent in the emerging socialist feminist work in the discipline, and have a particular relevance to ongoing historical materialist debates within geography. This is not surprising, given the historical development of work on women and the environment.

About ten years ago a growing number of geographers, beginning to look at contemporary developments in women’s roles and changes in urban and regional

¹ Reprinted with permission from Richard Peet. The original title of this essay was “Editorial Introduction”.

² For a general overview, see Zelinsky, Monk and Hanson (1982).

³ See, for example, Bowlby, Foord and MacKenzie (1981), MacKenzie and Rose (1982), and Hanson and Monk (1982).

structure and activity patterns, saw a relation. In the atmosphere of social and academic ferment which characterized the early 1970s, geographers began to explore this relation.

Such exploration seemed to involve a step into nearly uncharted territory. But researchers encountered guideposts established by workers in two areas: feminist analysis and politics as a whole, concerned to explore and explain changes in gender relations; and the emergence of historical materialist perspectives in geography, concerned to explore and explain changes in class relations relative to environmental alterations. The former body of work was obviously focused on examining the social processes underlying changes in women's lives. The latter, in its concern with the relation between process and spatial form, promised a way of contextualizing these processes and understanding the relations of women's lives to environmental production and alteration.

But the achievement of a synthesis, or even a dialogue, between these two analyses has taken many years and innumerable discussion.⁴ Despite the fact that feminist-inspired questions about gender and historical materialist explorations entered disciplinary discourse at the same time, motivated in large part by the same social changes (MacKenzie, 1980; MacKenzie and Rose, 1983), it is only in the last few years that connections between these two bodies of enquiry have been recognized and explicitly addressed at the empirical and theoretical level, and that the two themes noted above became evident. This required two previous developments: first a coherent socialist feminist perspective on the relations of gender and environment; and second a critical engagement with geographic perspectives as a whole and historical materialist perspectives in particular by socialist feminists within the discipline.

The former development is evident both in the growing range of empirical subjects addressed by feminists in geography and in the growing attention to methodological and theoretical questions which this empirical work raises. [...] And as this socialist feminist perspective emerges, it becomes clear that attempts to consider gender from a socialist perspective call for a process of critical discussion and reformulation of some basic assumptions of historical materialist work in the environmental disciplines.

This [essay] provides an historical and conceptual context for the papers, explicitly addressing the question of how such a socialist feminist perspective developed, both in feminist analysis as a whole, and within geographic research on gender. [...]

⁴ As it has in other social sciences and throughout the political arenas as a whole. See for example, Barrett (1980), Riwbotham et al. (1979), Sargent (1981).

Feminist Geography is Not Just About Women: The Development of Socialist Feminist Perspective on Gender and Environment

Most feminist research in geography has been about women, as a population subgroup. And much of it has been carried out by women, as it is generally women who experience gender relations as oppressive or constraining. But the questions raised by this research, and by the feminist analysis and politics which inspired and guided its enquiry, have fundamental implications for our understanding of human-environmental relations as a whole. The recognition of these implications ensued from the incorporation, by geographers, of an increasingly capacious and coherent feminism. The following examines the development of feminist analysis as a whole and then explores its adoption and adaptation within geography.

The changes women have experienced within the last forty years have shifted the parameters of their lives, shifted women's geography, temporality, political vision and political priorities. They did so throughout the fifties and sixties, incrementally and largely unnoticed, developing as they did in a period of conservative "consensus," an era ostensibly without "class war" or "sex war," where affluence and democracy were allegedly crumbling all boundaries (Birmingham Feminist History Group, 1929, 48-51; Wilson, 1980, 4-14). These changes proceeded apace through the unquiet late sixties and seventies, and continued into a growing recession which tightened another, more repressive, form of conservatism. Largely unnoticed, and for men largely mediated through the lives of the women they lived and worked with, these changes created increasingly evident conflicts in women's daily lives. These conflicts called forth a growing range of economically unrati ed and socially unrecognized organizations among women which pressed for, and simultaneously created, greater opportunities. Both conflicts and opportunities converged by the late 1960s, to give rise to a women's movement, which grew in numbers and political clarity and force throughout the following years.

Feminist Analysis

The women's movement, and the body of work which has emerged from it – feminist analysis – have provided a coherent politics and theory which made women as a social group, and women's activities, more socially visible. This movement and analysis assembled the multitude of myths, actions, ideals and struggles which constitute the gender category 'woman' and defined 'women' as social actors. It connected the largely invisible and apparently disparate problems facing women – as wage workers, domestic-community workers, state and retail clients, mothers, sexual beings – and socially located these as "women's issues." It named the politically discounted and divergent actions and organizations by women as 'women's organizations' around these issues.

But feminist analysis, arising from this movement, is not itself homogeneous, nor is it historically static.

Initially, women's greater entry into "public life," especially in the labor force, gave rise to a liberal feminism. Liberal feminists were inspired by the critique of the private family as the source of restrictions on women and the source of the "feminine mystique."⁵ They therefore focused on securing a greater 'social' role for women, especially as wage workers, by attempting to give women "equal rights" within the confines of given capitalist social relations.⁶

But the inadequacy of legal and formal solutions became increasingly evident. The concept of equal rights was largely formulated in terms of the "public sphere," and had little pertinence to the interrelation between 'public' and 'private' which mediated women's lives.⁷ Extensions of rights in one area of women's dual roles merely exacerbated problems in others. For working class women, the "right" to a job was largely an equal right, with other women, to the low wages and insecure tenure of feminized occupational ghettos, coupled with an exhausting second shift of domestic work. For bourgeois women, the right to a career often meant the sacrifice of a sustained and satisfying personal life.

As these limitations became increasingly evident, the struggle for equal rights gave rise to a "new feminism," an analysis which emerged from the realization that the woman's position is socially structured. The conditions and content of women's lives are not historical accidents which can be eliminated through formal alterations which leave the 'public' and 'private' basically discrete. Rather, woman's position is created and challenged by the functioning of society as a whole. Women's activities and the constitution and change of the category, 'woman,' are embedded in the process of reproducing capitalist social relations as a whole, and are a component of such social reproduction. Understanding this position calls for a re-analysis of complex social change from the perspective of how it structures women's activities. Changing this

⁵ This critique is exemplified in the work of Betty Friedan (1963) and to some extent in Simone de Beauvoir's (1961) work. It underlies the sociological studies of women in the late 1950s and early 1960s (e.g., Garvon, 1966; Klein, 1965; Myrdal and Klein, 1968).

⁶ Women organized for, and to some extent succeeded in gaining, a greater legal equality in marriage and the workplace. They achieved, in equal pay and sex discrimination acts, and through a series of changes in family and welfare legislation, a growing recognition of women's independent legal and political existence, and a social recognition of their domestic role. They also achieved a rather ghastly celebration of the commercial potential of the new "career woman" and her equal right to coronaries, ulcers and Executive Class Jet Travel (e.g. *Cosmopolitan* Magazine and a spate of publications on the Managerial Woman).

⁷ In addition, the concept of equal rights, based on the ideal of free and equal citizens precluded a recognition

position necessitates an alteration in all the social relations of life and work, and specifically in the social relations between ‘life’ and ‘work.’

This re-analysis of society has been carried out within two major feminist streams: radical and socialist feminism. For radical feminists, the conflict between genders is ultimately the primary historical and social conflict, one which has psychological roots reinforced by social practices. Analytic energy is focused on understanding the formation and functioning of gender as an oppressive force, leading to a concentration on relations of reproduction, especially the ‘personal’ and the psychological constitution of the individual. Out of this developed the “politics of personal life.” Radical feminist analysis derives from and reinforces a practice focusing on “.... struggles against male power and the social institutions through which it is reproduced (marriage, heterosexuality, the family)” (Beechey, 1979, 69).⁸

This analysis, in focusing on the “woman question,” made a great contribution. But many feminists felt that the emphasis on gender alone fixed the question of women’s oppression at a psychological or biological level, and isolated the “woman question” within social analysis and action. It provided no basis, or a very restricted one, for assessing the relation of gender oppression to other forms of oppression – such as those based on race, class, age, sexual preference – all of which are inextricably related in the experience of different women.

Socialist feminist analysis arose out of an attempt to articulate these developing understandings to broader theories of social change, primarily, but not exclusively, historical materialist theories.

In contrast to radical feminism, socialist feminism, while centered around the question of gender constitution and oppression, sees history in the materialist tradition. Socialist feminist analysis thus focuses on the institutions and social practices of capitalism (or other modes of production) as these affect women, and attempts to understand the relations of gender and class in the course of social change. Political strategy is directed at collective confrontation with these institutions and practices in such a way as to challenge the capitalist system as a whole, and set in motion a transition toward a non-sexist socialism.

Socialist feminists therefore ask: how do gender relations articulate to class relations? How does the constitution of gender articulate to class formation and change?

Most socialist feminists have discussed such questions using a framework which argues that gender constitution is a process implicated within a complex of

⁸ Some of the classics of radical feminism include Firestone (1971) and Millet (1969). For discussions see Beechey (1979) and Eisenstein (1979).

“productive” and “reproductive” relations, and that women’s position can be located “... in terms of the relations of production and reproduction at various moments in history” (Kuhn and Wolpe, 1978, 7). Analysis is focused around understanding the way in which these relations constitute gender and the way in which this process articulates to class formation and class action.⁹

While feminist analysis is neither homogeneous nor theoretically unproblematic, these developments have provided a basis for an increasingly coherent colonization and interrogation of the paradigms and empirical content of academic disciplines, including geography.

Gender and Environment

The development of work on gender and environment was influenced by these developments in feminism as a whole.

Work on women and the environment in geography is premised by three underlying assumptions:

1. Women, in their daily lives and historical roles, enter into social relationships which are significantly different – in some respects – from those of men.
2. These different social relationships mean that women will have significantly different perceptions, and make different uses, of the environment than men, and may encounter gender specific problems.
3. These differences may be important in understanding the development of urban and regional form and activity; and in urban and regional planning and policy formation.

Alison Hayford summarizes these premises, saying:

.... almost everywhere women’s lives are different in nature to men’s; their relations to the earth, to its resources, and to the productive systems that people have evolved for making use of these resources, are not the same as, nor even parallel with, those of men (Hayford, 1974, 1).

The aim of the research on women and the environment has been to define the nature and the parameters of these differences and to study their implications.

⁹ Also see Barrett (1980), Eisenstein (1979) and Rowbothom et al. (1979).

Work in the area began by criticizing the fact that women were either “invisible” within geographic literature (Hayford, 1974; Larimore, 1978) or were analyzed as “household surrogates” (Tivers, 1978, 304). In a seminal article, Burnett criticized behavioral and neoclassical equilibrium models of urban structure for assuming “... a society made up of patriarchal nuclear families with a traditional division of labour between the sexes” (Burnett, 1973, 57). Such assumptions were seen as weakening the explanatory and predictive power of models as theoretical and planning devices. Not only were such assumptions empirical oversimplifications, they prevented models from examining changes in family structure and process, and in female labor force participation, as possible parameters of urban change and development. These assumptions therefore prevented the incorporation of vital demographic and labor force changes into planning policy. By failing to examine, for example, the effect of women’s growing labor force participation and changes in family patterns on income distribution in the city, shopping, journey to work, residential patterns, and needs for specific social services, planning policies potentially exacerbated difficulties faced by urban residents, especially those faced by women whose lives no longer conformed to the “traditional pattern.”¹⁰

Writers in geography attempted to overcome these limitations by examining what had been assumed, through applying models to the measurement and analysis of women’s spatial activities. Most of this work was comparative, assuming a behavioral and perceptual norm in the city, that of a comparable group of men – husbands, co-workers – or of white, middle class heterosexual men in general. It measured women’s perception and behavior relative to this norm, specifying the extent to which women deviated. These comparisons laid the basis for an empirical definition of women as a distinct population subgroup and for specifying the parameters of this distinction.

Much of this work was, at least implicitly, concerned to analyze and plan for women’s growing labor force participation. It concentrated especially on studying the spatial constraints produced by married women’s dual roles as housewives and wage earners. It was found that wives generally have more restricted activity patterns than their husbands, and that wage earning wives have more restricted activity patterns than full-time housewives (Cichocki, 1980; Everitt, 1975; Hanson and Hanson, 1975). More specific work suggested frameworks for analyzing specific commuting constraints on dual role women and for locating facilities to overcome such constraints and increase the mobility of dual role women (Andrews, 1978; Madden, 1977; Palm and Pred, 1974). Other studies documented restricted activity spaces for other groups of women: full-time housewives (Michelson, 1973; Tivers, 1977), elderly women (Helms, 1974), and female criminals (Rengert, 1975).

¹⁰ For a general discussion of these issues from an inter-disciplinary perspective see Keller (1981) and Schmertz (1981).

The theme permeating this work is women's restricted activity spaces, and the fact that such restrictions remain with, and may in fact be exacerbated by, women's dual roles.¹¹ These empirical conclusions documented the legitimacy and importance of treating women as a geographic subgroup in their own right, and laid the basis for questioning the assumptions of many geographic models. But the concentration on women's spatial constraints per se also limited this research to documenting rather than explaining these constraints.

Other writers took women's restricted activity spaces as a starting point and attempted to analyze them as an expression and reinforcement of women's restricted social position. Much of this literature saw the gender division of labor as a space-structuring force, and saw spatial form as reinforcing women's restricted social position (Bruegal, 1973; Burnett, 1973). For example, cities were viewed as contributing to specific conflicts for women and as institutionalizing these conflicts. On a micro scale, it was argued that the "gender division of space" assigns interiors to women and exteriors to men, and that this assumes a moral status, becoming normative and self-reinforcing (Hayford, 1974; Loyd, 1975).¹² On the scale of the city as a whole, the home and residential neighborhood were seen to separate women from appropriation of urban space (Enjeu and Save, 1974; Hayford, 1974).

Similar themes have characterized work on women and the environment in other disciplines. A growing number of writers, for example, suggest that changes in women's roles render the current form of urban environment increasingly inappropriate or obsolete. They suggest that "Male domination and assumptions in environmental planning and design ... has (sic) led to the creation of many environments that discriminate against women and a design process that gives little recognition to the changing needs of women" (Wekerle, Peterson and Morley, 1980, 1) and "... there is agreement that the special needs of the 'new woman' have not been taken into account adequately by contemporary planners" (Haar, 1981, vii-viii).

Both the geographic literature and work in other disciplines have thus provided growing empirical evidence of the importance of understanding women's environmental constraints as one set of forces contributing to women's restricted social position. But all of this work has been limited by attempts to understand women's position within the "given" frameworks of the environmental disciplines. It all suffers, to some extent, from the aim defined by one geographer. "... the struggle to identify a distinct geographic perspective on women" (Loyd, 1978, 30).

¹¹ Similar work by non-geographers includes Gordon et al. (1980), Lopata (1980), Popenoe (1980), Saegert and Winkler (1980).

¹² In non-geographic literature see, for example, Berk (1980), Hayden (1980), Rock et al. (1980).

The attempt to prove that women suffer specific spatial constraints relative to men led to the definition of women as a “deviant” subgroup and, at least initially, precluded the recognition of the possible existence of a “distinctive women’s institutional metaphor[”] (Wekerle et al., 1980, 26). Women, by and large, were presented as “victims” of environmental constraints, not as actual or potential creators of environments.

This work has also implicitly elevated spatial restrictions to causal status, and failed to explicitly examine the social parameters of these restricted spaces, tending toward an implicit theorizing of “spatial oppression,” a “naturalization” of women’s roles as environmentally determined. In the process, the environment has been implicitly elevated to the status of villain. It is implied that the problem lies in the fact that women’s roles have changed, but the environment has not. In effect, this is an analysis in which two opposing structures – “women’s social position” and “urban environments” – face one another in a relation of hostile but untheorized opposition.

There are two fundamental problems stemming from this approach. First, the policy implications of this work can only be directed at facilitating women’s use of their restricted space. By neglecting direct examination of the question of the relation between the development of environment and women’s social roles, this literature can only ask how to overcome spatial dysfunctions in the efficient performance of women’s roles in capitalist society. The reforms recommended to eliminate restrictions on women’s spatial movement may in fact then serve to reinforce the oppressive aspects of the “new” role. Second, the attempt to fit questions about women into given spatial frameworks limits the ability of this work to contribute to the development of theory within the environmental disciplines as a whole. In the emergence of any new “area” in a discipline, there is invariably an attempt to ‘prove’ its empirical validity in terms defined by that discipline. But a continued concentration on empirical verification of women’s differences and problems will confine this work to the carving out of “women’s enclaves” within disciplines. Not only has this work been hampered by the lack of theoretical concepts for connecting ‘women’ and ‘environment,’ it may potentially be restricting its ability to produce these.

A growing number of writers are arguing for a reversal of the approach outlined above. Rather than attempting to fit questions about women into spatial frameworks, or into given environments, it is necessary to begin with an analysis of the social relations structuring women’s social position. It is essential to break down the ahistorical category ‘woman’ and ask what social relations define the specificity of women’s position in capitalist society. These relations will form the conceptual tools with which we can approach urban and regional development and begin to understand the relations between gender and environmental reproduction and change.

As noted above, socialist feminist analysis, in its focus on the interrelation between the activities of production and reproduction, provides a basis for approaching this question, one which is apparent in many of the papers in this issue. This and other

work make it evident that feminist research in geography has moved from an initial position of rediscovering and spatially locating an “invisible” female half of human in human-environmental relations to broader conceptual questions. But the integration of this new focus into the discussions of the discipline as a whole and specifically into non-feminist socialist discussions raises a number of issues. The following comments outline some of the parameters of this discourse [...].

Feminist Geography Is Not ‘Just’ Empirical: Some Implications for Historical Materialism

The implications of this emerging socialist feminist perspective for the discipline as a whole are only now becoming evident. [...].

It is evident that a socialist feminist perspective in common with “humanist Marxism” and critical theory precludes a “one-dimensional Marxism” which emphasizes relations of production to the exclusion of relations of reproduction.¹³ Just as socialist feminists as a whole have utilized a framework focusing on the interrelation of production and reproduction in structuring gender relations so, as noted above, much of the literature on women and environments has seen the relations between ‘private’ – largely reproductive – spaces and ‘public’ urban life as the basis of the relation between gender and environment. A large part of women’s historical and contemporary invisibility in discussions of human-environmental relations can be attributed to their assumed relegation to the ‘private’ sphere of the home, in which they carry on ‘natural’ and unwaged activities – reproducing labor power for a “separate” and external ‘economy.’ [...] [N]either this separation, nor this relegation, is historically consistent or ‘natural,’ nor can its reproduction and reinforcement be justified in historical materialist views of the environment.

A recent discussion of “new space for women” by Wekerle, Peterson and Morley (1980, 8-9) argues that

the separation of the home environment from public life and the denial of the economic contribution of domestic work are still the primary societal factors that lie behind women’s problems in relation to the home. Women’s traditional association with the home has been a major stumbling block in their access to the wider opportunities of the city. As a result, modern industrial cities are segregated into men’s and women’s spaces: women are viewed as “belonging” in the private domestic sphere of the home and neighbourhood, men are dominant in the public sphere

¹³ For discussions of critical theory, see Fay (1975) and Sayer (1982). On one-dimensional Marxism, see Lebowitz (1983).

of the market workplace, public institutions and political influence. This sexually segregated, public-private dichotomy is fundamental to modern capitalist societies and is reinforced by urban planning and design decisions.

Wekerle [1984] expands this argument, outlining some of the major constraints on women produced by the spatial separation of the contemporary city, noting how “solutions” to these problems necessitate an integrated approach to urban space.

[...]

[Current studies¹⁴] contribute to the development of a feminism which is cognizant of the importance of environment in reflecting reproducing and altering gender relations. They also reflect a geography which is cognizant of gender relations as an integral part of environmental creation, reproduction and change. Given the rapidity of changes in women’s lives which [current studies] document, and the protean and vigorous feminism which inspires them, one can neither expect, nor would one desire, quiescent and conclusive statements. But one can expect, and predict, a growing convergence between the empirical and conceptual concerns expressed here and those expressed within the historical materialist “mainstream.”

[...]

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¹⁴ Editors’s note: See papers published in a special issue of *Antipode* (vol. 16, no. 3, 1984), which this essay introduced.

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