

Toward a Theory of Emancipation: Feminist Critiques of Postmodernism

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Abstract

This paper addresses the relationship between the theoretical and practical methods and goals of feminists and postmodernists. It specifically addresses whether the foundational ideas of postmodernist philosophy undermine the emancipatory concerns of women. Through evaluating two of the defining theses of postmodernist philosophy, namely, the “Death of Man” and the “Death of History,” I argue that the strong version of the postmodernist critique of the concepts of subjectivity and history is incompatible with the social criticism central to feminism. In opposition to the view that deems these concepts as necessarily androcentric and in need of thorough abandonment, I show that what is required is a re-appropriation that takes into account the situatedness of the subject and the often non-unitary nature of historical narrative.

Key Words: feminism, postmodernism, social criticism, subjectivity, meta-narrative, emancipation

1. Can feminism be postmodernist and still retain an interest in emancipation?

In “Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism” Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson (1990) discuss how the insights of feminists and postmodernists can inform each other in such a way as to create a postmodern feminism that accentuates the strengths of both theories while eliminating their weaknesses. Specifically, a postmodernist reflection on feminism reveals its inherent and often self-defeating use of essentialism, while a feminist reflection on postmodernism reveals its inherent androcentrism and political naïveté. The assumption is that the tendency of postmodernist thinkers to practice critique only within the institution of Philosophy results in their remaining apolitical in the context of a political reality of oppression. However, the question arises as to whether the distance offered by an apolitical philosophy to dominant political interests is one that may work in favour of the feminist goal of the emancipation of women. The possibility of a reference to knowledge and truth outside of politics may potentially be in favour of the emancipatory concerns of women in that it promotes an independent authority to legitimate knowledge and political claims that resists being subsumed under dominant political interests. This paper will explore this question by evaluating two of the defining theses of postmodernist philosophy, namely, the “Death of Man” and the “Death of History,” as illustrated by Jane Flax in *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* and Seyla Benhabib (1995) in “Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism.” I will argue along with Benhabib that the strong version of the postmodernist critique of the concepts of subjectivity and history is incompatible with the social criticism central to feminism. In opposition to the view that deems these concepts as necessarily androcentric and in need of thorough abandonment, what is required is a re-appropriation that takes into account the situatedness of the subject and the often non-unitary nature of historical narrative.

2. Defining feminism and postmodernism: the risk of essentialism

Before examining the aforementioned theses a few concerns regarding method and terminology must be noted. It can be difficult to pinpoint a defining theme of the whole of feminism or to locate what constitutes the feminist standpoint as doing so may entail the suppression of particular voices and experiences. Flax (1990) claims that in searching for a cause or core of gender relations or male domination we run the risk of reflecting the very mode of thinking defined by the dominant paradigm itself (p. 28). Yet, we must validate the “authority, coherence, and universality” of our own standpoint, which thus runs the risk of excluding standpoints unlike our own (p. 28).

Furthermore, any attempt to define feminism in general risks falling into the forms of essentialism and over-generalization that feminists rightly remain intent on deconstructing, but to cease to do theory at all or to be paralyzed for fear of proceeding from our own standpoint is equally limiting. When seeking to speak from the standpoint of women in general we may shed light on some aspects of society that may have been suppressed by dominant perspectives but it remains impossible for anyone to speak on behalf of women in general because no woman exists outside of a specific location of gender relations. This lesson is part of what feminists have learned from postmodernists: to cease the search for an Archimedean point to legitimate knowledge claims, to carefully consider those knowledge claims that purport to be neutral or absolute, and to evaluate the interconnections between knowledge claims and power (p. 27).

Though the work of feminists and postmodernists can at times be complementary, they are also contradictory. Similar to feminism, postmodernism cannot be treated uniformly, though it tends to have a common object of criticism, the European Enlightenment. White western feminist and postmodernist discourses are often centered around criticisms of the institution of traditional western philosophy and both seek to develop new forms of social criticism that do not rely solely on the traditional philosophical foundation established in the West. In short, both feminists and postmodernists attempt to reconstruct the relationship between philosophy and social theory (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990, p. 19). The discourses are deconstructive in the sense that they foster skepticism about “ideas concerning truth, knowledge, power, history, self, and language that are often taken for granted within and serve as legitimations for contemporary Western culture” (Flax, 1990, p.29). Nevertheless, there are significant differences between the ways in which, and the degree to which, feminists and postmodernists abandon traditional philosophical assumptions and methodologies, and in the goals of this abandonment.

Postmodernists often focus on the critique of philosophy itself, which often essentializes “philosophy.” Thus, their project tends to focus on debunking what is characterized by postmodernists as the foundationalist and essentialist tendencies of traditional western philosophy. Social criticism then follows from this movement. In contrast, feminist encounters with philosophy are secondary to an interest in social criticism. Feminists often begin with critical social perspectives while conclusions about the status of philosophy follow. Thus, on the one hand, while postmodernists may provide stronger criticisms of foundationalism and essentialism, they often have weaker conceptions of social theory. In rejecting traditional philosophy there is often a rejection of theory itself which makes it difficult for the normative and prescriptive content of social critique to be theoretically grounded. On the other hand, while feminists may provide more developed and detailed social criticism, they at times fall back into foundationalism and essentialism, thus demonstrating a need to be more informed by philosophical considerations (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990, p. 20).

While Fraser and Nicholson (1990) effectively demonstrate the complementary strengths and weaknesses of postmodernism and feminism in order to look toward the possibility of a postmodern feminist theory, there are some problems that arise with this combination. Some of these problems are illustrated in Benhabib (1990) and Flax’s (1995) work, which shows that this alliance may be theoretically impossible because the strongest versions of postmodern theses can be understood to undermine the normative content, specifically the emancipatory ideals, of feminist theory. This can be elucidated with the examination of two central postmodernist theses, the “Death of Man” and the “Death of History.”

3. Examining central postmodernist theses: the “death of man” and the “death of history”

The “Death of Man” signifies the attempt of postmodernists to eliminate essentialist concepts of humanity and nature where these concepts appear to be innate characteristics. Postmodernists tend to replace these essentialist concepts with notions of humanity as a social, historical and linguistic artefact (Benhabib, 1995, p. 18). “Man” is thus conceived in a web of fiction and in various forms of signification in which “the subject is merely another position in language” (18). In this sense “Man” is “decentered,” which entails that the only way that he can be understood according to order, structure, narrative or fiction is through an imposition of theory (Flax, 1990, p. 32). As this fictional character, “Man” has no way of stepping out of the fiction in which he lives, and therefore lacks an external point of reference through which he can know himself. In other words, he has no autonomous, independent, non-linguistically constructed or a historical rationality or self-consciousness to access reality (32-33). Benhabib (1995) describes the correlate feminist thesis as the “Demystification of the Male Subject of Reason” (p. 18).

When postmodernists locate “Man,” the once supposedly neutral and universal rational subject, in contingency, historicity, and culturally variable social and linguistic circumstances, feminists focus on gender situatedness and the practices surrounding it. The supposedly universal structures of experience and consciousness explored by traditional western philosophers are understood by postmodernists to subsume differences of all kinds, including gender differences. As such, the traditional western discourse of the self-identical subject precludes the recognition of otherness and difference (18-19).

Another thesis commonly put forth by postmodernists is the “Death of History” (18). According to Flax, any conception of an intrinsic order or logic to history is another fiction connected with the fiction of “Man.” What is generically called ‘history’ is a story that man uses to understand his place within time. In order for his place in time to be of importance he constructs “‘master narratives’ in which History is his, the subject’s...” (Flax, 1990, p. 33). This idea of history serves as another justification for the fiction of “Man” that also supports other kinds of grand-narrativizing, such as the story of the progressive development of humanity. Notions of the historical progress of humanity support the value of unity, homogeneity, and totality, all of which subsume all that does not accord with this uniform metanarrative. This thesis is correlated with the feminist thesis of the “Engendering of Historical Narrative” (Benhabib, 1995, p. 19). The subject of the grand narratives of the western philosophical tradition has usually been the white, propertied, Christian male, head of household, and this subject has been taken to be the universal historical subject for whom history describes his progress.

The philosophies of history that have predominated during and since the European Enlightenment transform historical narratives into one unified, homogenous linear story of this subject alone. According to postmodernists, this mode of narrativization is presupposed by and constitutes an act of violence. This is because any element in the complex flux of history that does not accord with this unified schema is deemed irrelevant. The result is that the lives of a significant portion of humanity fail to be represented at all, or are under- or mis-represented. As Flax (1990) puts it, “the contradictory stories of others must be erased, devalued, [and] suppressed” (p. 33). What follows is that all aspects of discourse or action that may at first seem contradictory to the metanarrative are either ignored or made to fit under its schema. It is important to note that although it may seem that what feminists call for in response to this imposition is inclusion, as Miranda Fricker (2000) notes in “Feminism in epistemology: Pluralism without postmodernism,” an adequate feminist politics extends beyond the demand for inclusion since it fundamentally seeks change (p. 148). In other words, to seek inclusion in an unjust social order would simply implicate those previously excluded into the same narrative of domination rather than pressing for an emancipated future. This insight suggests that the primary aim of feminist theory is radical social change. What follows is the consideration that although the prominent postmodernist theses of the “Death of Man” and the “Death of History” may parallel prominent feminist theses, their compatibility with the feminist social criticism that presses for social change must be examined.

4. Feminist approaches to postmodernist deconstruction: the “death of man” and the “death of history” reconsidered

Following Benhabib’s (1995) analysis, to fairly evaluate if feminists can support the “Death of Man” thesis, we must discuss the thesis in terms of its weak and strong versions. The weak version of the thesis entails that the subject is always understood as situated in social, linguistic, and discursive contexts (Benhabib, 1995, p. 20). This situatedness is valuable for feminist practice since it prevents the continuing inauguration of a supposedly neutral subject, one that has in the history of western philosophy represented the white, propertied male. This insight itself can be seen as the product of the increasing recognition of situatedness. While this recognition of situatedness has been an essential tool in debunking the presumed neutrality and universality of what turned out to be only a particular kind of subject, Benhabib (1995) raises the issue that the focus on situatedness seems to undermine the valuable characteristics of subjecthood that were previously attributed to the neutral and universal “Man.” These attributes include: “self-reflexivity, the capacity for acting on principles, rational accountability for one’s actions and the ability to project a life-plan into the future...” (p. 20). The focus on situatedness may result in overlooking the desirability of these characteristics.

This issue becomes more pressing when evaluating the strong version of the thesis. This version entails that “*the subject is merely another position in language*” (p. 20). As Benhabib puts it, “[t]he subject dissolves into the chain of signification of which it was supposed to be the initiator” (p. 20).

What follows is that any notion of action connected with the subject is obliterated altogether, even those that may be considered essential to moral and political life such as intentionality, accountability, self-reflexivity, and autonomy. Benhabib claims that to abandon these aspects of subjectivity is to conceive of a subject who “can no longer master and create that distance between itself and the chain of significations in which it is immersed such that it can reflect upon them and creatively alter them” (p. 20). In other words, as a position in language the subject becomes another object of signification, losing its capacity for signifying and engaging the world in which it lives in order to “creatively alter” that world according to moral and political concerns. As such, this view of the subject is categorically incompatible with the feminist goal to change the world in accordance with the subjectively recognized conditions of women. While subjectivity is by necessity conditioned by symbolic structures of language and narrative, to stop at this point and conceive of subjectivity only in this conditioned way is to lose the creative will that can give rise to new social relations. As Benhabib (1995) puts it, “we are in the position of author and character at once” (p. 21). To lose the author side of the story appears to render emancipatory struggles impossible.

While my contention is that this strong version of the postmodernist thesis is incompatible with the emancipatory goals of feminists, it is important to note why it is still compelling for feminist theorists. Moving away from the focus on what have been considered androcentric visions of the self, with central categories such as action, initiation, rationality, and autonomy, opens up new ways to define what it means to be a self, particularly the ones that emphasize social situatedness over a kind of isolated autonomy. These categories have been revealed to be predominantly constitutive of male experience which has historically been connected to different social practices than those of women. As such, recognition of the situatedness of subjective experience has resulted in the articulation of women’s experiences of subjectivity that do not fit into the traditional western category of agency. Thus, while it is of the utmost importance that the recognition of women’s agency becomes constitutive of contemporary society, it is also important that the specificity of the new forms of women’s agency be brought to bear on how agency is itself conceived.

5. Agency and emancipation

Furthermore, a reevaluation of agency requires that we reconsider what aspects of it may still be required for the feminist goal of emancipation, which may include what has been deemed androcentric. Benhabib (1995) asks, “how in fact the very project of female emancipation would even be thinkable without such a regulative principle on agency, autonomy, and selfhood?” (p. 21). The impetus for such a question arises out of the injunction that selfhood and self-determination are part and parcel of any pursuit of emancipation because the latter must involve an identity to be emancipated, and further, what has been historically sought in struggles for liberation is a realization of a freedom that is inextricably bound to the right to determine one’s own life. With this in mind, at least minimal notions of agency, autonomy, and selfhood seem necessary for emancipation to be possible.

It is also important to note that in the western philosophical tradition there is a strong connection between notions of agency, autonomy, and selfhood on the one hand, and accountability and responsibility on the other. In eliminating any of the former aspects of self we are also bringing into question the way in which responsibility has been conceived according to the same tradition, specifically, that one is a freely choosing actor who is therefore responsible for one’s actions. To evaluate the cogency of another theory of responsibility moves beyond the scope of this discussion, but within the traditional western paradigm of self and responsibility, the capacity to signify, to speak, to act, to initiate still appear indispensable for a coherent notion of responsibility. The understanding of the subject as responsible actor is essential not only for the subjecthood of women themselves who have been historically deprived of such subjecthood, but also for the perpetrators of patriarchy who must be considered acting, intending, initiating subjects in order to be held accountable for themselves. In this light, the strong thesis of the “Death of Man,” which insists on abandoning aspects of subjectivity because they can be understood as both linguistic fictions and androcentric in character, can be seen as incompatible with the critical social theory that advocates the emancipation of women. As a result, at least minimal notions of agency, autonomy and selfhood are both desirable and theoretically necessary for feminist theory and practice.

6. Historical narrative and emancipation

Furthermore, to continue to analyze the compatibility of postmodernism with feminist social theory we must examine the weak and strong versions of the “Death of History” thesis as articulated by Benhabib (1995). As Benhabib (1995) claims, the weak version of this thesis can have two general meanings.

The first is the demand to end those grand narratives that are essentialist and monocausal. The second is the political meaning that demands the end of the hegemony of any group as the sole agent of history or any group that claims to represent the forces of history (p. 22). The nature of these demands still leaves room for a metanarrative of the history of women. However, Fraser and Nicholson (1990) describe how beginning in the 1980s new pressures emerged that called all forms of metanarrative into question. These pressures included the participation of women outside of the white, middle-class, and heterosexual constituency that had been predominant in feminist theory. These new voices objected to existing narratives of women's oppression because they failed to illuminate their own experiences. As such, the wider range of class, sexual, racial and ethnic participation in feminist politics has led to alterations in theory that have contributed to the conclusion that metanarratives are unhelpful in promoting a community among women since they inevitably either subsume or highlight their differences (Benhabib, 1995, p. 22-23).

As follows, the strong version of the "Death of History" thesis would entail a complete rejection of historical narrative. The focus would instead become local narrative, which by its very nature as the telling of individual experience, remains immune to essentialism and reductionism. However, the question arises as to whether struggling individuals need to interpret history in larger terms than their own particular situation. Specifically, it may be useful to understand one's own struggle as a struggle of many, and the birth of such struggle in a time beyond one's own. While it is clear that essentialist and reductionist grand narratives are no longer desirable and hinder community among the oppressed, what remains open to discussion is the degree to which metanarratives are necessary in the pursuit of emancipation. Benhabib (1995) poses the question in the following way: "Is it possible for struggling groups not to interpret history in light of a moral-political imperative, namely, the imperative of the future interest in emancipation?" (p. 23).

While it is conceivable that one may participate in an emancipatory project without an overarching narrative that connects past struggles with the future, an historical narrative of oppression seems necessary for one to recognize oneself as oppressed in the first place. Local narratives may not suffice to provoke consciousness of and action against oppression if the local critique available does not include a vision of a substantial social struggle, one that would connect those struggling in differing circumstances. The postmodernist critique of metanarrative certainly illuminates the exclusionary and reductionist character of over-generalizing narratives that ignore aspects of difference and lack relevance for individuals. However, metanarratives of historical struggle can also be sources of liberation, as individuals can understand themselves as implicated in a socio-political-historical order that others share. It is difficult to imagine how one might gain the understanding necessary to provoke the desire for social change without identification with society- or world-wide systems of oppression. Perhaps oppression itself is too vast a category to be captured by local narratives. And furthermore, in referring to moral-political principles in one's struggle, one is already invoking the rational apparatus championed by traditional western philosophy. The abandonment of this tradition by feminists then appears to undermine the goal of emancipation.

Moreover, the discussion of the demise of metanarrative also must address if, and the degree to which, the abandonment of metanarrative also marks the abandonment of the subject of the narrative, i.e. the rational self-reflexive agent that moves this history forward. While it is clear that subjectivity can no longer be defined solely in terms of rationality and self-reflexivity, it remains necessary for a viable critical feminist theory to stress the existence of an agent of history in order that human beings can be conceived as authors in that history as opposed to characters already written.

7. The limitations of localized critique

In addition to clarifying the relationship between metanarrative and subjectivity, a final consideration is whether or not any particular locality contains the critical resources needed for emancipatory politics. If social critique remains local in order to avoid the over-generalizations involved with universal concepts of metanarrative and subjectivity it must succumb to whatever critical resources are available within a given location. While it is true that one is always drawing on the resources available in one's social location, the notion of local critique seems to preclude the possibility of appealing to standards created by philosophy itself, such as normative principles deduced by rational reflection (p. 27). While this reflection must take into account the particularity of one's struggle, an aspect of the reflection may also transcend the local, such as cases where one invokes concepts of right and wrong, justice and injustice, freedom and unfreedom. This transcendence of the local protects against the absorption of critique into the dominant political apparatus of one's culture. Benhabib (1995) summarizes this point in the following way:

Social criticism needs philosophy precisely because the narratives of our cultures are so conflictual and irreconcilable that, even when one appeals to them, a certain ordering of one's normative priorities, a statement of methodological assumptions guiding one's choice of narratives, and a classification of those principles in the name of which one speaks is unavoidable. (p. 27)

These theoretical tools offered by the tradition of western philosophy appear very useful and even necessary for feminist theory to remain theoretically sound. When postmodernist notions of critique are contrasted so sharply with this tradition, rather than working within this tradition, they become self-contradictory by necessarily calling upon the theoretical tools offered by the tradition they have supposedly abandoned. Since we are unable to conclude that any given culture will contain the critical resources needed to create an emancipated future, and we always run the risk that our theories merely reify dominant social and political interests, the practice of philosophy and the principles that result from such practice are decisive for feminist social theorists.

Consequently, the strong versions of the "Death of Man" and "Death of History" theses undermine the emancipatory goals of feminist theory. The lessons learned from these theses are many, some of which include: the danger of the over-generalization of essentialism, the often androcentric aspects of subjectivity in the guise of neutrality and universality, and the danger of monocausal and exclusionary historical narratives. These dangers point to the ways in which the experience of women has been underwritten in the dominant theories of subjectivity and history in the West. However, it remains important for feminists to maintain a commitment to a concept of agency, the responsibility that goes with it, and the reappropriation of history to not only include the lives and experiences of women, but also to alter the narrative to one that includes the trajectory of women's emancipation. As such, the project of emancipation requires a subject for whom emancipation is the trajectory and this subject must, in turn, locate herself in an identifiable history. For this reason, while feminists can ally with the postmodernist deconstruction of the traditional western concepts of subjectivity and history, they cannot afford to abandon these concepts entirely if they are to retain an interest in emancipation.

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