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Fieldwork

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Radical geography aims to know the world and change it for the better. These two goals are linked to Enlightenment modernity and science. However, unlike mainstream science, in radical geography both knowledge production and struggles for justice are political, power-laden processes.¹ Furthermore, critical geographers are learning from feminist, anti-colonialists and others committed to radical social change to acknowledge that uneven capitalist development is premised on exploiting colonised/raced, gendered, sexualised and non-human Others. Thus, addressing persistent economic and class inequities necessarily means grappling with concomitant social, sexual and environmental violence. Changing the world for the better then not only requires imagining different relationships between humans, but also between humans and nature.

The task of imagining and constructing just worlds requires fieldwork. In Ecology and Political Science, the disciplines in which I was formally trained, fieldwork meant going somewhere (the “field”) to collect verifiable, generalisable data about specific aspects of the environment, society, space, or politics. But extended research on ecology, economic development, and social movements revealed that such positivist approaches did not account for the messy connections between people, places, and non-human denizens of this planet. I also made the uncomfortable discovery that my research questions, categories, and field sites were overdetermined by history, politics, and my own identity as a “third world woman” (Asher 2017; Katz 1994). By “fieldwork”, then, I do not refer to a method of knowing something, or the means of taking action for scientific or political ends. Rather I contend that fieldwork entails fundamentally interrogating the work done within fields of inquiry, including radical geography, to produce legible and legitimate objects and subjects of knowledge and action.

Such work was gathering pace in the 1990s. Scholars from a range of disciplines—anthropology, environmental history, geography, sociology—contested the technical, apolitical, and ahistorical approaches of positivist, empiricist sciences. In conjunction with colleagues from the humanities, and drawing on post-structural and post-colonial critiques of modernity and the Enlightenment, they opened up conversations about the meanings, production, affects, and effects of scientific knowledge.² As a field biologist, I found my way into these conversations with Donna Haraway’s (1989) *Primate Visions*, and then via feminist writing.

Feminists questioned the masculinist and essentialist assumptions pervading fields from anthropology to zoology in order to focus attention on the partial

nature of evidence, and the unpredictable and contingent nature of research. They also examined how the foundational categories and dualisms of the Enlightenment (nature–culture, object–subject, feminine–masculine, sex–gender, colony–nation, knowledge–praxis, and more) were constituted as a result of power, representation, and political economy. Feminist anthropologists and geographers scrutinised how ethnography and cartography assumed that “cultures” and “fields” existed *a priori*, rather than as products of uneven relations between peoples and places. Feminist and other geographers also denounced the discipline’s links to the military and the territorial and imperialist imperatives of states. Marxist feminists traced how the uneven relations of capitalist production piggyback on patriarchal, racist and imperialist structures, and how social production necessarily but silently depends on social reproduction (Federici 2012; Katz 2001b; Mies 1982; Wright 2006). Applied to the Marxist variant of modernity, this means rethinking the analytical parameters of class and the political promise of revolutionary change.

Since the 1990s, various feminist, post-colonial, transnational, “of colour”, black, queer, decolonial, post-humanist, and other critical perspectives have reframed debates about science, the nature of subjectivity, domination, and resistance; and posited new forms of radical politics. Despite this work, empiricism continues to haunt geography, and positivist methods (strongly influenced by “evidence-based science”) have re-emerged in the 21st century. As I face the challenging task of rethinking the fields and work of social and environmental justice, I repeatedly return to the realisation that the ethical imperative to act must be accompanied by persistent critique. I learn that grappling with the pitfalls of essentialist and oppositional thinking involves the impossible necessity of depending on the very categories of my critiques, for example, “third world women” and “nature”.

Once again feminist politics and theory offer an illustration and a key lesson. Western feminists distanced themselves from the “women=nature” connection as they sought access to subjectivity and citizenship by claiming that they too belonged to “culture/reason”. In later moments of feminist politics and theorising, attempts to make third world or non-western women visible and retrieve their heretofore hidden agency and voice sought to highlight their traditional or cultural knowledge about the natural world. Some versions of this are about retrieving the speech of subaltern women. In her discussion of the debates around women, gender and development, Kriemild Saunders (2002:13) illustrates the problems with both positions:

Rather than thinking the impoverished Third World Woman as a sovereign, having a privileged insight into development processes, it may be more appropriate and cogent to see her positioning as a symptom of the over-determined effects and resistances to multiple oppressions and exploitative processes. This delineation definitively takes away the authority of a sovereign, revolutionary subject.

Neither claiming connections to nature nor distancing oneself from it are unproblematic options, and one needs to think about the vulnerability of all positions. These are key lessons for those of us foregrounding or formulating other (non-

Eurocentric, radical, post-humanist, subaltern are some contingent descriptors) ways of knowing but wishing to avoid nativist thinking.

To build on these lessons, I turn to Gayatri Spivak's anti-disciplinary texts to grapple specifically with two key issues of fieldwork: first, the ethics and politics of representation (present in her call "to learn to learn from below" and to "fieldwork" itself); and second planetarity—a concept that asks us to think alterity beyond the human. In the afterword to *Imaginary Maps*, her translation of Mahasweta Devi's short stories about tribals in India, she notes:

I have no doubt that we must *learn* to learn from the original practical ecological philosophers of the world, through slow, attentive, mind-changing (on both sides), ethical singularity that deserves the name of "love"—to supplement necessary collective efforts to change laws, modes of production, systems of education and health care ... Indeed, in the general predicament today, such a supplementation must become the relationship between the silent gift of the subaltern and the thunderous imperative of the Enlightenment to "the public use of Reason", however hopeless that undertaking might seem. One filling the other's gap. (Spivak 1995:201)

Spivak's call to learn from below, which she calls "fieldwork" in a 2002 interview with Jenny Sharpe (Sharpe and Spivak 2002) is very different from the retrieval of subaltern knowledge or subjectivity. When focusing on other knowledges, Spivak's work provides critical methodologies to grasp how our desire for "other" alternatives is also bound up in political economy. Spivak's approach is deconstructive, anti-positivist, and focuses on understanding those ambiguous desires, analyses, and actions. The much-misunderstood argument in her "Can the subaltern speak?" (1988) is that those who wish to make the subaltern speak must locate themselves in the international division of labour.

Spivak (1999) calls for a historico-political perspective to trace the erasure and mobilisation of "culture" in dominant narratives, including those of the state, nationalism, and development. Her methodology entails a scathing critique of capitalist development and "supplements Marxism" in service of feminist, anti-racist and anti-colonial efforts. This "supplementing" neither offers a corrective to Marxism nor rejects it. Rather it works with Marx's thought to trace the insertion of rural communities, especially third world women, into the circuits of global capitalism.

Spivak draws attention to non-Eurocentric ecological movements and to "planetarity"—a term she uses for being concerned about nature and ecology beyond human self-interest or functionality. Once again a caution that this is not about recovering subaltern practices. She notes:

In order for planetarity to be used for feminist utopias or ecological justice or whatever, you would have to put it in the value form, and I use the term value form in the original Marxian, not Marxist, sense. Marxists have either given it up or are confused about it, one reason being that the English translation of that simple sentence in Marx describing value has right from the start been wrong. Marx writes that it is *inhaltlos und einfach*, "contentless and simple". Why contentless? Because it allows the use of a form. All the English translations are "slight and simple" or "slight in content". How could they mistranslate a word like *inhaltlos* in which the *-los* is cognate to English

“-less”? The only answer is that they didn’t understand what Marx was trying to say. Take the example of a bottle of water where you have the ingredients listed and assigned percentages. That is water put in the value form. Because the value form ... is what makes commensurability possible. So by putting a certain percentage on this ingredient you make this water commensurable with roast beef, say. You can compare. That’s all it is. If you want planetarity to travel to ecological justice, or utopian feminism, or whatever, you have to put planetarity in the value form, and its unmotivated reminding task—of an epistemological gap—evaporates. Marx was inviting us to understand and use the pharmakonic potential of quantification through an appreciation of the value form. Planetarity is elsewhere, always, from finding a measure. (Spivak 2011:61–62)

Spivak repeatedly returns us to non-passages and aporias. She rereads Marx to trace the work and expansion of capital, and how it draws more and more of the world into its orbit by turning all kinds of products and knowledge, including the “Indigenous” variety, into the value form. But capitalist development cannot simply be replaced by Indigenous alternatives. Nor can it be accepted, given that it is unjust by its very nature. Marx recognised this, but his thinking was limited by his time and culture. It is imperative to supplement Marxism and re-engage his writings, including about socialism as an alternative to capitalism. It is equally imperative to think beyond economic globalisation to “re-imagine the planet” (Spivak 2012:335). It is for these tasks that Spivak invites us to think ethically with the responsibility-based livelihoods of aborigines—and through them rethink the relations between “culture” and “nature”.

My fieldwork then is my homework, and its challenge is to articulate why and how the grammars of feminism, anti-colonialism, and Marxism in a transnational frame are crucial to struggles for environmental and social justice. Such work is also at the heart of radical geography. Its challenges are as large as its goals are ambitious: to change the world and suture the many severed relations between nature-cultures through methodological, epistemic and actual multi-lingualism.

Endnotes

¹ Of course as this volume outlines, there are vast debates about the parameters and genealogies of radical geography and those of the notion of “justice”.

² This too is an extensive literature of which the following are a limited sample (see Bourdieu 1993; Cronon 1992; Hall et al. 1996; Haraway 1988; Katz 2001a; Staeheli and Lawson 1994; Vishweswaran 1997; D.L. Wolf 1996; E.R. Wolf 1982; see also, more recently, Bryan and Wood 2015; Spivak 2014; Wainwright 2013).

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