

## Chapter 7

# Poststructural Interventions

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Poststructuralism is a theoretical approach to knowledge and society that embraces the ultimate undecidability of meaning, the constitutive power of discourse, and the political effectivity of theory and research. Beginning in the 1960s as a movement within French philosophy, poststructural theory soon migrated into the English-speaking world where it has had a transformative impact within philosophy as well as literary and cultural studies. More recently, poststructuralism has gained ground within human geography and the other social sciences. The goals of this chapter are to offer a brief overview of the key insights and concerns of this relatively new theoretical tradition and to chart its nascent development within economic geography, giving a sense of its powers and potentials.

Poststructuralism is sometimes equated with “postmodernism,” a term that tends to be loosely defined. In geography, for example, postmodernism variously refers to an historical epoch (Harvey, 1989) characterized by a particular set of socioeconomic practices and ideological “conditions;” an aesthetic style in film, architecture, and other cultural forms; or a theoretical approach to knowledge and society (Gibson and Watson, 1995, p. 1). The latter is what we are calling poststructuralism – a philosophically informed and theoretically distinctive approach to knowing and the world (Amariglio, 2000). What is postmodern about poststructuralism is its rejection of certain readily identifiable modernist conceptions of knowing, the knower, and the known. While knowledge is understood within a modernist frame as singular, cumulative, and neutral, from a poststructural perspective knowledge is multiple, contradictory, and powerful. The implications of this difference for economic geography are what we wish to explore.

### **Poststructuralist Antecedents and Origins**

It was within and against the modernist tradition of structuralism that poststructuralism emerged. Perhaps its most direct antecedent was the linguistic structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure, who rejected the view of traditional linguistics that words are symbols standing in for objects in the world. Saussure (1966) argued instead that

words could be seen as “signs” constituted by a relation between two parts, the signifier – the acoustic or visual image – and the signified – the concept invoked by this image. In any language meaning emerges not from the connection of words to their extralinguistic referents (which is entirely arbitrary) but from the socially constructed relations of difference between signs (Yapa, 1999a).

Consider the word “factory.” In the pre-Saussurian view this word is a symbol that represents or stands in for a building where production takes place – its real world referent. By contrast, in Saussure’s structuralist view, the word “factory” is a sign that encompasses the spoken or written word FACTORY (the signifier) and the IDEA (the signified) of a building that is differentiated from other things because of the culturally encoded practices that take place within and around it. The word “factory” takes on meaning through the distinctiveness of its sign in relation to all other signs in the language, for example, in its differentiation from “office” or “house” or “field” or “playground.” What was revolutionary about this formulation was the view that meaning is created within a complex social structure of relation and difference rather than through words substituting for objects, representing them in their absence (Hewitson, 2000).

While structuralism can be seen as destabilizing to the modernist presumption that language is a mirror of reality, in other ways it was a quintessentially modernist project. For structuralist thinkers, underlying the flux and contingencies of the social world lay unified formations that gave shape to social life. The linguistic theories of Saussure, the cultural theories of Claude Levi-Strauss, the economic theories of Karl Marx and the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud each, in their various ways, traced the origin and organization of complex social phenomena to deeper underlying structures. Uncovering or discovering those structures was the task of structuralist science (Amariglio, 2000).

The philosophers who were to become known as “poststructuralists” confronted the structuralist project with a skeptical attitude toward determination by “underlying” structures and attempts to grasp the ultimate “truth” of language, culture, society, and psyche. But perhaps their most salient move was to call into question the fixed relationship between signifier and signified that characterized Saussurian linguistics. From a poststructuralist perspective, language does not exist as a system of differences among a single set of signs. Rather the signifier–signified relations that generate meaning are continually being created and revised as words are recontextualized in the endless production of texts. The creation of meaning is an unfinished process, a site of (political) struggle where alternative meanings are generated and only temporarily fixed. Thus the meaning of the word “woman” in the context of “husband,” “home,” and “family” is very different from its meaning in the context of “lesbian,” “work,” and “politics.” Political struggles undertaken by feminists can be seen as multiplying the contextualizations and significations of “woman” and, in the process, destabilizing the fixities of meaning associated with a patriarchal order (Daly, 1991).

So far in this discussion we have encountered both the anti-foundationalism and the anti-essentialism that characterize poststructuralist theory. An anti-foundationalist epistemology refuses a vision of knowledge as “grounded in reality” or as charged with the task of mirroring or “reflecting” the world (Rorty, 1979). Rather than being a dependent reflection of an independent real, poststructural knowledge

is a social process in its own right, interacting fully with other social and natural processes in the constitution of social life. This anti-foundationalist epistemology is directly linked to an anti-essentialist ontology. If the word “woman” does not “correspond” to a generic female human being, its meaning cannot be understood as fixed by an essential sameness that unifies all women. Instead “woman” is resignified every time the word is recontextualized. There is no essential, fundamental, or invariant concept of “woman” to anchor the word, but rather an infinity of contextualizations that provide multiple and contradictory readings of what woman is or could be.

Despite their antagonism to foundations, poststructuralist thinkers do not see meaning and knowledge as unconnected to other aspects of social life. Meaning is understood as produced under specific social and intellectual conditions, and knowledge is not a “true reflection” but a productive and constitutive force. Although knowledges cannot be differentiated according to their greater or lesser accuracy (their success or failure in reflecting the world), they can be distinguished by their effects – the different subjects they empower, the institutions and practices they enable, and those they exclude or suppress. Thus is it a matter of *consequence* rather than a matter of *indifference* what kind of knowledge you produce (despite the familiar criticism that, for poststructuralists, “anything goes”).

### Poststructuralist Strategies

Poststructuralism offers a number of strategies for calling into question received ideas and dominant practices, making visible their power, and creating openings for alternative forms of practice and power to emerge. The ones that we explore here are deconstruction, genealogy and discourse analysis, and the theory of performativity.

#### *Deconstruction*

Deconstruction is a reading practice originating with the contemporary French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1967). Working against what he calls the “metaphysics of presence,” or “logocentrism,” Derrida calls into question certain fundamental axioms of Western thought. These include:

- the law of identity and self-presence (if a building is a factory, it is factory);
- the law of non-contradiction that establishes identity in relation to its “other” (if a thing is a factory, it cannot also be a not-factory); and
- the law of the excluded middle (factory and not-factory contain all the possibilities in a given situation) (Jay, 1991, pp. 92–3; Gross, 1986, pp. 26–8; Hewitson, 2000, p. 4).

Taken together these “laws” give us objects/identities that are stable, bounded, and constituted via a negation (of all that “factory” is not).

What Derrida identified as logocentrism is the Western pattern of producing meaning through a binary structure of positive and negative (A/not A, factory/not factory). Within the frame of logocentrism, the first term in a binary is endowed with positivity at the expense of the other: presence and value are attached to

factory, while not-factory is absent and devalued. The binary structure establishes a relation of opposition and exclusion rather than similarity and mixture between the two terms – thus if the factory is a site of production, then not-factory, such as the household, is not (or if production exists within the household, it is inferior to that taking place in the factory). This structure of opposition is associated with a metaphysic of valuation that may be subtle but is impossible to avoid – the pervasive tendency to take seriously presence, positivity, and being, and to discount absence, negation, and non-being/becoming. It is easy to see from this example how logocentrism might give rise to a concept of “economy” as bounded, stable, and inherently more important than the non-economic.

Feminist poststructuralists, among others, have observed that attempts to (re)value the absent or subordinated term within a binary hierarchy are easily undermined. This reveals the presence of what Saussure identified as a “master signifier,” that operates to stabilize relations of difference. Poststructuralist feminists have renamed logocentrism “phallogocentrism” to highlight the way in which the figure of the masculine (the phallus) fixes meaning and endows presence and positivity to one side of the binary, producing an aligned chain of dominant terms within Western Enlightenment thought, as in the following example:

**Man** / woman  
**Mind** / body  
**Reason** / emotion  
**Objectivity** / subjectivity  
**Self** / other  
**Economy** / society  
**Production** / reproduction  
**Factory** / household

We can detect the role of the phallus as master signifier in the regularity of the association of the first term with masculinity, dominance, and importance. To come back to our factory example, the very identity and positivity of factory is gained within a socio-linguistic structure that associates what goes on in a factory with reason, objectivity, mind, man, and economy. These dominant terms reinforce each other, differentiating the kind of production that takes place in the factory from the kinds of production taking place in households, backyards, streets, and fields, endowing it with greater “reality,” independence, and consequence.

Derrida’s deconstructive strategy is interested in rethinking difference, outside a binary and hierarchical structure, as part of an ultimately political project of creating spaces of “radical heterogeneity.” A Derridean deconstruction of the sign FACTORY might begin by revaluing the subordinate term in the factory/not-factory binary. Feminist economic theorists, for example, have attempted to reverse the flow of cultural valuation by pointing out how many hours are spent in unpaid domestic labor in the household and how this contribution to Gross Domestic Product, if measured, would outweigh the labor performed in factory-based production (Waring, 1988). To take this a bit further, in economic geography the household is traditionally seen as the site of social reproduction – a dependent, less determining, often devalued set of (what are presented as non-economic) practices such as

housework and child-rearing. Reversing the production–reproduction binary, we might represent reproduction as the activity that engages everyone at all times; it is the entire process of creating the conditions for society to continue to exist. Reproduction is thus a more embracing process than production. It is the general case of which production is the special case, the whole of which production is a part.

One of the problems with reversal is that it leaves the binary structure intact, with the hierarchy of valuation simply switched around. Another and more potent deconstructive strategy is to blur the boundaries between the terms, highlighting similarities on both sides of the divide, undermining the solidity and fixity of identity/presence, showing how the excluded “other” is so embedded within the primary Identity that its distinctiveness is ultimately unsustainable. Thus we might represent the household as also a site of production – of various domestic goods and services – and the factory as also a place of reproduction. So-called “non-economic” activities said to take place in the domestic realm – the display of emotions, the performance of sexual and gendered identities, socialization, training, and caring – are not only also practiced in the public realm of the factory, but can be seen to undermine the integrity of the factory as a site of efficient production, rational calculation, and profit maximization. The presence of the excluded other “within” renders the Identity unfamiliar and hollows out its meaning (Doel, 1994). Suddenly the stability of what we understood as “factory” begins to crumble.

Deconstruction highlights moments of contradiction and undecidability in what appears to be a neatly conceived structure or text (Ruccio, 2000). It points to the endless deferral of meaning within a system of differentiation, and foregrounds the inability of any sign to totally embody an essential meaning. Meaning is created and recreated within specific texts and contexts. Since ultimately no master term exists to fix concepts to particular signifiers, meaning is always in process and incomplete.

### *Genealogy and discourse analysis*

Whereas Derrida highlights the unfixity and contestability of meaning (albeit within a frame in which meaning is constrained by the “metaphysics of presence”), Michel Foucault’s project was to examine how certain knowledges and meanings become normalized and accepted as Truth. Foucault’s work highlights the ways in which the construction of meaning is an enactment of power that is not only traced within language but also etched upon the body and continually re-enacted in social life. In his use of the term “discourse,” Foucault (1991) refers to a rule-governed practice that includes meanings set within a knowledge system as well as institutions and social practices that produce and maintain these meanings. To return to our factory example, a shed with a saw-toothed roof in which people take one set of materials and, using various kinds of machines, transform them into other materials becomes known as a “factory” both because of the differentiation of FACTORY within a system of linguistic signs and also because of its place in an even wider system of signs made up of social conventions, routinized bodily movements, rules of behavior, institutional actors, and so on. This collection of metal, glass, bodies, energy, and produced materials takes on meaning and is endowed with positive value only within discourse – in this case, perhaps, a discourse of industrialization.

Foucault (1981) challenges the universality and “truth” of meaning by developing a distinctive method of discourse analysis. This involves: (1) a *critical* analysis of the violences enacted by any theory or system of meaning (what it excludes, prohibits, and denies); and (2) a *genealogical* analysis of the processes, continuities, and discontinuities by which a discourse comes to be formed. His work directs our attention to the way knowledges exercise and produce power – through apparatuses of regulation (for example, institutions like schools, prisons, workhouses, and factories where techniques of bodily discipline and surveillance prevail) and through the development and application of technologies of self-management that help to organize the daily business of living (for example, budgets, diets, maps, sexual advice columns, advertisements for personal hygiene products).

A critical analysis of the discourse of industrialization might highlight how the bodies and material production taking place in households are devalued within the disciplinary knowledge systems of economics or economic geography. And a genealogical analysis might trace the formation of these disciplined understandings of “industry” and “economy,” focusing upon the ruptures and discontinuities as well as the regularities and correspondences associated with key words of industrialization discourse. Such a genealogy might start, for example, with a Physiocratic vision of the economy in which an agricultural surplus makes non-agricultural activities possible (thus establishing the dependency and secondary status of industry). It might then move to the centrality and originary status of industry in the discourse of industrialization, with its vision of the economy and economic growth – including demand for agricultural products and services – being driven by productivity increases in manufacturing; and finally to the literature on the postindustrial economy, in which high-level financial institutions and transactions establish once again the subordination of industry, this time to financial speculation and the vagaries of the international finance sector. What emerges from this project of tracing changing knowledges of industry is a relatively stable conception of the economy as an integrated totality, centered on a determinant site that constrains, drives, or dictates to other sites/activities. Through the process of genealogy this notion of economy is “denaturalized” made visible as a discursive construction.

Foucault’s influence on poststructuralism has produced a focus upon how different forms of power intersect with knowledge production to create certain valorized conceptions of the subject in any historical period. While much of Foucault’s work appears to emphasize the construction and consolidation of dominant discourses that “subject” the individual to powerful forces beyond her control, his intervention also opens the way for examining the proliferation and multiplicity of discourses that can create subjects able to resist and reconstitute power in different ways. Here the work of Judith Butler and other queer theorists on the performativity of discourse conveys some of the incompleteness and openness of processes of “subjection.”

### *Performativity*

Performativity for Butler is “the reiterative and citational practice through which discourse produces the effects that it names” (1993, p. 2). In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler explores performativity specifically with respect to gender. Gender is not a

stable characteristic of the subject that emanates from some biologically determined or culturally inscribed binary structure. Rather, gender identity is practiced through the repetitive performance of certain acts. Gender must be continually re-enacted in order to secure its seeming fixity. This notion of iterative performance as constitutive of what is taken to be a stable reality opens up some interesting insights into the politics of knowledge. Butler is drawn to emphasize the inevitable differences between performances, the slippages between iterations, suggesting that gender (or other) identities are always unfinished and open to subversion.

The concept of performativity opens a pathway through the sometimes disconcerting ungroundedness of the poststructuralist project and points toward engaged interventions that challenge the hegemonic knowledge/power systems so clearly outlined by Foucault. What intrigues Butler are the openings through which queer subjects can be seen to emerge, outside an established heteronormative order. Butler is committed to destabilizing the binary gender categories that function to buttress compulsory heterosexuality. By emphasizing the uncertainties and discontinuities inherent in gender performance, she brings to light existing possibilities of disruption and invention in the cultural process of gendering. In this way she opens a space for “agency” and unpredictability, in a mode of subjection that is often seen as biologically or culturally given.

For Butler and the other theorists we have discussed here, poststructural interventions are not equated with a retreat into theory and a disengagement from the world, politics, ethics, and social change. Rather, poststructuralism opens up a new role for theory as a political intervention. Poststructural knowledge actively shapes “reality” rather than passively reflecting it. The production of new knowledges is a world-changing activity, repositioning other knowledges and validating new subjects, practices, policies, and institutions.

### **Poststructuralist Moments in Economic Geography**

In economic geography, the poststructural reconfiguration of the relation between knowledge and action, research and reality, has inspired a number of new directions in research. It has also increased our responsibility to ask “What kind of knowledge do we want to participate in creating? What are the effects of the knowledge we construct? What possibilities does our research enable?” In the rest of this chapter, we briefly address some of the economic geographic work that is animated by the strategies of deconstruction, genealogy and discourse analysis, the theory of performativity, and a vision of the researcher as an agent/intervener.

#### *Deconstruction*

J. K. Gibson-Graham (1996) employs a deconstructive approach in *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*, highlighting the ways that a capitalism/noncapitalism binary operates in economic discourse to constitute capitalism as a necessarily and naturally dominant form of economy. Noncapitalist economic practices (whether in the household, the formal market sector, the informal economy, alternative economic experiments, or socialist or cooperative undertakings) are generally understood with respect to capitalism – as either the same as, the opposite of, the

complement to, or contained within capitalism. They are seen as weaker and less able to reproduce themselves. Noncapitalism is represented in the interstices, in experimental enclaves, or as scattered and fragmented in the landscape. Capitalism, by contrast, is represented as systemic, naturally expansive, and coextensive with the national or world economy. As a consequence, many studies of noncapitalist activities focus upon their imminent destruction, their proto-capitalist qualities, their weak or determined position within a local economy. These activities are rarely represented as resilient, ubiquitous, capable of generative growth, or driving economic change. In the face of “globalization,” which is represented as the march of an ever more powerful capitalism across the economic landscape, noncapitalist activities are rendered powerless or subsumed.

Drawing on the insights of feminist economic theorists and theorists of the informal sector, Gibson-Graham has attempted to undermine the “capitalocentrism” of economic discourse, both popular and academic, pointing out that nonmarket and thus by definition noncapitalist activities produce at least half of the total product worldwide. Yet in the dominant economic discourse of both left and right, these activities, as well as noncapitalist production for a market, subsist in the shadows of capitalism, relatively invisible and subordinated to its presumed dominance and importance.

In addressing the capitalism/noncapitalism binary, Gibson-Graham’s principal deconstructive move is to bring the subordinate and negative term into independent existence, representing “noncapitalism” positively as an array of different economic forms rather than simply as an absence, insufficiency, or dependency. Using a language of economic difference derived from Marx, she identifies in the economic landscape a variety of economic relations in addition to capitalist ones, including feudal, slave, independent, and communal relations in both the market and non-market sectors. As the black boxes of the formal, informal, alternative, and domestic economies are opened up for scrutiny, “the economy” emerges as a complex interdependency of different economic relations within the variously constituted household, volunteer, self-employed, family business, prison, and illegal, as well as industrial market, sectors.

In a simultaneous deconstructive move, the unity on the other side of the binary can be dissolved and represented as a contradictory multiplicity; capitalism can be deprived of its solid and coherent identity, becoming different from itself and difficult to generalize. One approach to this project has been through reconceptualizing the enterprise. Enterprises are traditionally assumed to share a common structure, be driven by a common imperative – the logic of growth, accumulation, or profitability – and encounter a fundamentally similar external terrain, the business world or market. Yet there is a growing literature emerging from economic geography, as well as economic sociology, anthropology, accounting, organization theory, and Marxian political economy, that highlights the heterogeneity of companies. Erica Schoenberger’s (1997) work, for example, on the social embeddedness of firms traces the effects of culture, tradition, and affinity upon enterprise behavior, and demonstrates the ways in which personal values and relationships within management undermine many of the assumed corporate goals of efficiency and profit maximization.

O’Neill and Gibson-Graham (2001) explore the role of competing discourses of management in shaping the fluid entity that is unproblematically represented as “the



capitalist firm.” Examining an Australian minerals and steel multinational, they produce a disruptive reading that emphasizes the decentered and disorganized actions taken in response to multiple logics circulating within and without the corporation. Their analysis represents the enterprise as an unpredictable and potentially open site, rather than as a set of practices unified by a predictable logic of profit maximization or capital accumulation. Untethered from a preordained economic logic, the enterprise becomes recognizable as an ordinary social institution, one that often fails to enact its will or realize its goals or even fails to come to a coherent conception of what these might be. In the context of such a representation, the conflation of capitalism with power, and the related vision of noncapitalism as excluded from power, becomes more difficult to sustain.

By conceptualizing the economy as diverse and heterogeneous, not centered upon any privileged set of activities, or ordered by any core dynamic, but always in the process of (discursive) construction, Gibson-Graham (1996) has embarked on a project of reconstructing the political terrain on which alternative economies are imagined and enacted. Using deconstruction to open up concepts of economy to include unpaid, nonmarket, and noncapitalist activities, and to envision economic difference outside the binary frame, she is producing alternative economic representations as a contribution to innovative forms of economic policy and activism.

### *Genealogy and discourse analysis*

Poststructuralist research on “the economy” highlights the social and discursive construction of local, regional, national, and global economies, and works against dominant representations of these entities as real containers and determinants of social life. The literatures on post-Fordism, globalization, and development, to name but a few, are not taken as sophisticated descriptions of economic reality but as discourses that actively constitute economic possibility, shaping and constraining the actions of economic agents and policymakers.

One of the prevalent discourses that organizes knowledge of economic change is that of “development” – the story of growth along a universal social trajectory in which regions or nations characterized by “backwardness” are seen to progress towards modernity, maturity, and the full realization of their potential. This organic model of change has structured theoretical work in a large number of disparate fields but is now under scrutiny, not least because of its Eurocentrism and its devaluing and disabling effects on the “less developed.” In anthropology, Arturo Escobar (1995) has begun the task of critically analyzing and producing a genealogy of development discourse. His work traces the historical production of the “Third World” – that collection of countries whose populations came to be represented as poor, illiterate, malnourished, underemployed, requiring aid, and in need of Western models of development. The Third World was the problem for which “development” provided the solution – through the establishment of a range of institutions, practices, and experts that were empowered to exercise domination in the name of the scientifically justified development project. Escobar’s close reading reveals how the practice of identifying barriers to growth and prescribing development pathways has in effect violently “subjected” individuals, regions, and entire countries to the powers and agencies of the development apparatus. The subjects produced within

and by this discourse are ill-equipped to think outside the presumed Order and Truth of the economic development story and to reject a vision of the “good society” emanating from the West. Escobar’s Foucauldian approach to development discourse has opened the way towards an “unmaking” of the Third World, by highlighting its constructedness and the possibility of alternative constructions. Importantly, his work points the way toward a repositioning of subjects outside a discourse that produces subservience, victimhood, and economic impotence (Gibson-Graham and Ruccio, 2001).

Less entrenched but perhaps more ubiquitous is the discourse of globalization that circulates today in popular, academic, and policy discussions. In a recent paper on the integration of the New Zealand domestic economy into global networks of trade, finance, and production, Wendy Larner (1998) takes on the “globalization” story. She emphasizes that globalization is not, as many economic geographers have claimed, a “new reality” that forces nation-states and their citizens into new roles (p. 600), but a discourse that powerfully poses a different conception of the relationship between the national and international economies. In New Zealand the globalization “imperative” has been constituted out of specific political ambitions, rationalities, and social practices. The current representation of New Zealand’s economy as a “node in the flows and networks of the Pacific Rim” (p. 607) rather than as a self-contained entity has ushered in new forms of economic governance that privilege the market over the state as a mechanism for social provision, and situate the individual within a global rather than a national spatial imaginary. That these changes are the product of currently dominant but not entirely robust discourses Larner takes as encouragement to begin to identify different political strategies and alternative spatial imaginaries that might have more progressive (or at least different) effects. While not ignoring the very real impacts of job loss, privatization, capital redirection, and the replacement of old systems of governance by new, Larner challenges economic geographers to intervene in the constitution of the world around them by refusing to reify globalization as an extradiscursive *fait accompli*.

### *Performativity*

To recognize the performativity of discourse is to recognize its power – its ability to produce “the effects that it names” (Butler, 1993, p. 2). But the process of repetition by which discourse produces its effects is characterized by hesitations and interruptions. This performative dimension of discourse is highlighted in recent geographic research on economic subjects. Unlike the coherent and rational modernist subject, the poststructuralist economic subject is incompletely “subjected.” Her identity is always under construction, constituted in part through daily and discontinuous practices that leave openings for (re)invention and “perversion.”

In the work of Linda McDowell on gender in the City of London, for example, masculinity, femininity, and the gender division of labor are represented as arising within a particular geographical and temporal milieu rather than as manifestations, in a new economic environment, of a patriarchal system of oppression. Through observations of behavior, clothing, and demeanor on the trading floor, and interviews with participants in the merchant banking business, McDowell (1997) explores the ways in which gender is produced and transformed in the very process

of buying and selling money, futures, and shares. Gender is not constructed outside the City and “taken to work” but is constituted in and through participation in “economic” practices. Its limits and possibilities are not ordained by a sexed body, a patriarchal structure, or culturally transmitted gender norms but are constructed and reconstructed in the moment of performance. “By making it clear that what seems an inalienable part of a sexed self is actually a temporally and spatially specific performance” (p. 165), McDowell highlights the possibility of transforming and multiplying “acceptable fleshy styles and corporeal practices” and enabling new forms of gendered power in the workplace.

Jenny Cameron (1996/97, 1998) takes up the issue of gender performativity in the context of a site often ignored by economic geographers – the households of “middle-class” women in Australia. In these domestic economies Cameron finds the familiar gender inequality in the division of domestic labor, but chooses not to interpret the unequal allocation of housework as evidence of the resiliency of patriarchal structures of male domination and female exploitation. Her close reading of interview texts reveals instead a complex process through which the performance of particular household tasks constructs heterosexual identity for both women and men. Emphasizing the precarious and shifting boundary between what lines up as masculine and feminine in Australian society, Cameron shows how subjects actively work to sustain the fiction of a natural and stable gender identity which their lives and social contexts continually undermine. Moreover, the inevitable slippages and contradictions between performances suggest the possibility of alternative genderings and the different sexualities they might signal or permit.

### **Poststructuralism and the Politics of Research**

This discussion so far, with its emphasis on the constructive and disruptive powers of discourse, suggests that poststructuralism has the potential to offer a new model of geographic research. If knowledge is not assigned the task of providing an accurate reflection of reality (Rorty, 1979), then research doesn’t simply reveal “what’s out there” in the world. Recognizing the effectivity of knowledge creates an important role for research as an activity of producing and transforming discourses, creating new subject positions and imaginative possibilities that can animate political projects and desires (Gibson-Graham, 1994). In this concluding section of the chapter, we focus on three projects of poststructural research that actively engage in producing or destabilizing discursive formations, thereby participating in the constitution of power, subjectivity, and social possibility.

In a study of Filipina domestic workers and labor market segmentation in Vancouver, British Columbia, Geraldine Pratt (1999) traces the ways various discourses operate to devalue and disempower Filipina immigrants. Pratt’s critical and genealogical project reveals how Filipina women are assigned to a variety of subject positions and defined in relation to “what they are inferior to.” As Live-in Caregivers, they are identified as non-Canadians, taking jobs no Canadian would want and deprived until recently of rights accorded to Canadian workers. As “housekeepers,” often with a university education or professional qualifications (e.g., registered nurse) from the Philippines, they are positioned as less qualified than European “nannies.” And as Filipinas within their community, they are seen as

“nannies” rather than regular “immigrants” and stigmatized as promiscuous “husband stealers.”

Pratt collaborated with organizers at the Philippine Women Centre, running focus groups with Filipina domestic workers in which these discourses with their devalued subject positions emerged. What Pratt emphasizes, however, is that they emerged in the context of silences and gaps, contradictory discourses, and alternative subject positions, signifying that discourse is never fully capable of exercising power and producing “subjection.” Pratt sees the possibility for “agency, and for the creative redirection and redefinition of subject positions” (p. 35), in the coexistence of contradictory or incommensurable discourses. When domestic workers begin to represent themselves to themselves and to their employers as workers rather than “family members,” for example, they move from a “racial” subject position within a discourse of immigration and citizenship to a “class” subject position in a discourse of employment and employee rights.

Pratt understands her critical discourse analysis as an intervention that is an “important element of disrupting . . . oppressive institutional practices” (p. 35). Discourse analysis denaturalizes subjectivities and social practices, exoticizing them and making them “remarkable” as elements of a particular formation. The process of analyzing a discourse highlights the contingency of its alignments and reveals it as an attempt at stabilization. It thus simultaneously suggests its vulnerability to destabilization and reconstruction.

In the Philadelphia Field Project, Lakshman Yapa (1999b) is attempting to integrate the Pennsylvania State University’s mission of teaching, research, and service with a poststructural intervention into urban poverty. The initial and critical step in this project is to problematize the dominant discourse of poverty, which Yapa sees as having three prominent characteristics: it assumes that knowledge *reflects* meanings already existing in objects; it is founded on a subject/object duality in which poverty is the object/problem and the social scientist is the subject/non-problem; and it embodies an essentialist ontology in which problems like poverty have root causes and solutions. Yapa proposes, by contrast, that meaning is *constructed* in discourse, that social science is part of the problem of poverty, and that the causes of poverty are “multiple, diffused, and reside in thoroughly overdetermined systems” (p. 11).

The dominant discourse of poverty treats it as a problem with lack of income at its root. Social scientists collect information on the poor to understand who and where they are, what levels of poverty they experience, and why they have insufficient income. Depending on the political context, policymakers may then devise strategies to improve access to income among the impoverished. Yapa offers a different, anti-essentialist understanding of poverty, seeing it as a multidimensional social construction of scarcity that has an infinity of origins or causes and therefore an infinite number of points of intervention. Reducing poverty to a problem of inadequate income not only suggests that increased income will alleviate the problems of poverty – including poor nutrition, lack of access to health care, lack of transportation, inadequate educational resources, substandard housing – but closes off (by making invisible) other avenues for addressing these forms of deprivation.

Yapa’s vision is that poverty involves scarcities of basic goods like food, clothing, housing, health, and transportation which are complexly constructed by the entire set of conditions constituting a society. Since none of these conditions is the root

cause of poverty (Yapa, 1998), none of them constitutes the privileged approach to addressing it: "Poverty is created at a large number of sites spread throughout the larger society," so "no one grand project of economic development, jobs, income or even affirmative action can provide a solution to poverty" (p. 8). Yapa's argument is that to deal with poverty we can "start where we are" and focus on available agents, their substantive competencies, and a range of feasible forms of intervention. Thus a nutritionist and food activist who has no knowledge of economic development theory does not have to create enterprise zones to solve the general problem of poverty, but can directly address a specific substantive problem (for example, inadequate food supplies and nutrition) through nutrition education, developing cooperatives for purchasing food, organizing classes for the intergenerational transfer of cooking knowledge, etc.

Students in the Philadelphia Field Project do not speak with inner city residents about poverty or lack of income but instead ask substantive questions about why they have "problems meeting their daily needs for food, housing, transport, etc." This accords with the view that there is no general logic of poverty but rather specific conditions constructing scarcity in each case. The students also do not offer themselves as "general change agents" but as individuals with certain substantive competencies and the ability to create knowledge that may be relevant to the needs of the community. Recognizing the ways that academia has been implicated in poverty, the students are attempting to create a knowledge and practice of anti-poverty that is not based on a subject/object hierarchy but rather on the specificity of scarcities, the substantive competencies of communities, and the availability of agents.

In both the United States and Australia, J. K. Gibson-Graham is undertaking community-based research in a regional setting, attempting to generate a discourse of economic diversity as a contribution to a politics of economic innovation (Byrne et al., 1999). The Australian phase of the project is situated in a region where privatization of a large state energy authority has produced widespread unemployment and a sense of regional victimhood and hopelessness. Early on in the project, researchers conducted focus groups with a range of economic actors (planners, business people, unionists, media workers) and social and community actors (welfare workers, clergy, artists, teachers) to explore narratives of regional change. In both groups the story of economic restructuring that emerged identified the regional economy with mining and energy production, and positioned local actors as powerless in the face of global and national forces. When the groups were asked to think of the strengths and successes of their communities, a different but halting story of economic diversity and cultural and social innovation began to emerge (Gibson et al., 1999). In conversation with some of the participants, an action research project was planned that would begin to develop this alternative but subordinated discourse of regional identity and economic possibility.

Participatory action research (PAR) is a practice that has traditionally been associated with politically motivated modernist research projects. Designed to empower communities that are marginalized or oppressed, this research methodology actively involves community members in the initiation, design, conduct, and evaluation of research (Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991). In its original mode, PAR is seen as bringing oppressed people to a recognition of their common interests, based upon their shared humanity or their structurally determined experiences of

oppression. In its poststructuralist guise (Gibson-Graham, 1994; Reinharz, 1992), PAR involves enabling conversations across different identities, building partial and temporary communities among a “complex and diverse ‘we’” (Brown, 1991, p. 81). Interactions between academic and nonacademic researchers in the process of research generate new languages and social representations that can become constituents of alternative social visions and practices.

During the early stages of the Australian project, both nonacademics and academics recognized the importance of language and representation. In the absence of a language of economic diversity, the mainstream discourse of “development” had positioned the region as entirely dependent on investment by capitalist firms, which might or might not be attracted by various blandishments. This vision, especially as it was reiterated by the press, had assumed the status of grim “reality,” making it nearly impossible to talk hopefully about regional capacities and potentials. Using community researchers, the action research project is designed to produce an alternative “accounting” of the regional economy, one that recognizes a wide variety of economic relations and economic subjects, along with the particular gifts and capacities the latter possess (especially those of three economically marginalized groups – retrenched workers, unemployed youth, and single parents). This alternative accounting will serve to destabilize the identity of the area as primarily a “resource region.” Its collective compilation will be a first step in creating opportunities for new regional actors and different economic subjects to come together to talk about and construct alternative regional futures.

In this poststructuralist research project, research is a process of engendering “conversations” through which new languages, identities, communities, and social possibilities emerge. Focus groups, individual interviews, interactions between academic and community researchers, community conferences, and other “conversations” are both the sites and products of research. One goal of the project is to produce new models of regional development that exceed the theory and practice of capitalist industrialization. But, just as importantly, the research aims to validate a different set of economic subjects, energizing them to intervene in the ongoing conversation that is economic development. In these ways the project will enable new political identities and initiatives.

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