

Debates and Reports

GENDER RELATIONS AS A PARTICULAR FORM OF SOCIAL RELATIONS

LAWRENCE KNOPP[†] and
MICKEY LAURIA^{††}

The attempt by Foord and Gregson (1986) to reconceptualize 'patriarchy' through realist methods of analysis is excellent. We find ourselves in particular agreement with their arguments concerning the superiority of the concept 'gender relations' over 'gender roles', and with their contention that patriarchy should be thought of as a particular form of gender relations.¹ We also appreciate their analytical approach which identifies "sets of inter-relationships . . . between the general character of an object . . . its particular form and its unique, individual, instance" (p. 198). We would suggest, however, that Foord and Gregson have made two analytical errors which impinge crucially on the reconceptualization towards which they move and subsequently on the focus of their prescribed research agenda.

The first analytic error concerns their contention that capitalism and patriarchy are "*conceptually independent* objects of analysis" (p. 201). Foord and Gregson argue that this is so because *conceptually* one does not need to understand gender relations to understand capitalism (although to understand any individual, empirical instance of capitalism gender relations will be crucially important). This is certainly true. But, as Foord and Gregson argue with respect to the relationship between patriarchy and gender relations, "the inverse does not hold" (p. 200). Gender relations are a *subset* of social relations; indeed, unless one accepts a distinction between 'production' and 'reproduction' (which we hold to be largely an ideological creation unique to capitalism), they are *productive* relations. That is, they produce/reproduce

[†] Department of Geography, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242, USA.

^{††} Department of Geography, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, Louisiana, 70148, USA.

labor, in historically specific ways. Therefore gender relations (and their specific forms, e.g., patriarchy) cannot be understood without the more general categories of social relations (modes of production) and their particular forms (capitalism, feudalism, primitive communalism, etc.). We would argue, therefore, that the social organization of gender into relationships of power is part of the particular form of a mode of production as well as of its unique, individual instance. This is particularly true given the importance of biological reproduction (which Foord and Gregson see as a necessary relation within gender relations) to any particular mode of production. While Foord and Gregson acknowledge that "gender relations will be embedded in all forms of social relations" (p. 199), they also argue that:

. . . gender relations as an object of an analysis cannot be incorporated into theoretical work on specific modes of production beyond the point of acknowledging that specific social relations in particular places will always be mediated by gender relations (p. 201).

But this begs the question, in that first, an understanding of the particular mode of production of which particular gender relations are a part is, *contra* Foord and Gregson, *absolutely essential* to an understanding of these gender relations. Thus, gender relations are not a *theoretical* object of analysis in their own right. Secondly, even if this were the case, this argument begs the question of how these "conceptually independent objects of analysis" will be integrated into social analysis more generally. The authors argue that this is to occur at the empirical level in that specific social relations in particular places will always be mediated by gender relations. But this is also true of social relationships at the 'particular' (rather than 'unique, individual instance') level of analysis. If the authors' concept of mediation does not include theoretical interactions (see Wright, 1978:23), then it says nothing more than that gender relations should be tagged on at the empirical level. We contend that gender relations are considerably more important to productive relations generally than this would seem to allow. Finally, the integration of concepts solely at the empirical level belies the authors' own realist views concerning epistemology and ontology.

Now all this is not to say that similar relationships of power between genders cannot exist in different modes of production. What we do mean to suggest is that the *meaning* of these relationships will be different in these various contexts. For instance,

capitalist patriarchy is fundamentally different from feudal patriarchy or 'socialist' patriarchy. It 'super-exploits' female labor, for the purpose of (a) enhancing the production of (and hence extraction of surplus value from) male labor, and (b) maintaining a 'reserve army' of low-wage workers (see Buechler, 1984:24–25). In other modes of production the oppression of women may take completely different forms (e.g., the 'protection' and physical domination of women in primitive communalist societies characterized by matrimonial exchange relations) and certainly serves completely different ends (the maintenance of stable inheritances and the authority of elders over juniors – Meillassoux, 1981:77–78). Thus 'patriarchy', and the more general object 'gender relations', are almost meaningless when considered in isolation from a more general set of social relationships (a particular mode of production) of which they are always and inevitably a part. They simply lack the explanatory power of more general concepts like 'mode of production' and 'capitalism', from which a host of systemic contradictions can be deduced. Gender relations, and the authors' mediations, can be more fruitfully thought of as occurring at the 'particular' level of analysis as well as at the 'individual' level, and must therefore be theorized conjointly with a particular mode of production. We may not need 'patriarchy' or 'gender relations' to understand capitalism, but we most certainly need capitalism (or some other particular mode of production) to understand gender relations (patriarchy).

Foord and Gregson's second error flows, in part, from this first one. Having (erroneously) established gender relations as conceptually distinct from any particular mode of production, they proceed to define this object of analysis in terms of its basic characteristics and necessary relations. The basic characteristics are easily identified as the female and male genders (although even here Foord and Gregson forget the degree to which gender is 'socially constructed' rather than invariant (see Murray, 1984:56, Escoffier, 1985:136). The necessary relations of 'gender relations' are then identified as biological reproduction and heterosexuality. But the authors' justification for this second necessary relation is very weak. First the term 'heterosexuality' needs desperately to be disaggregated. It is not clear whether the authors are referring to certain behaviours (in which case heterosexuality is clearly a contingent form of gender relations), or to some 'state of being'. If the latter, then this implies an acceptance of heterosexuality and, indeed, 'sexuality' more generally as something which is biologically or psychologically fixed. This not only contradicts the authors' own position, as explicated elsewhere in the paper (see

Foord and Gregson, 1986; 208, footnote 13), but also a large body of empirical evidence (not the least of which is the 'existence' of homosexual and bisexual women and men) which suggests that 'sexuality', while grounded in the human body, is always a social construction (Foucault, 1980; Snitow, Stansell, and Thompson, 1983; Ross and Rapp, 1983; and D'Emilio, 1981; 1983a; 1983b).

We prefer to think of sexuality (and especially particular sexualities, involving particular 'object choices', e.g., heterosexuality) as contingent forms of gender relations. Furthermore, while heterosexual *behavior* is still the primary form of biological reproduction, it has become increasingly clear that even this is a contingent relationship for biological reproduction (due to technologies of artificial insemination, both inside and outside of the womb).

The only internally necessary relationship remaining for the concept 'gender relations' that we can find, then, is biological reproduction. While we would argue that biological reproduction is a subset of the more general category 'production and reproduction of life' (henceforth referred to simply as 'production') this does not pose nearly the problems for the authors' subsequent analysis of patriarchal forms of reproduction that their first error does. The analysis of patriarchal forms of reproduction as hinging on male control of female fertility is sound. Their analysis of patriarchal heterosexuality as a necessary (rather than contingent) form of patriarchal gender relationships, however, is in error.²

Gender relations of some kind are clearly necessary to that portion of production which is species propagation. But, in principle, they are necessary to *all* forms of production, since, as Foord and Gregson acknowledge, human beings are always and everywhere engendered. Therefore, we argue that gender relations constitute a subset of the broader category 'social relations', and that biological reproduction is a subset of the more general category 'production'. Disaggregating these is useful for understanding the necessary and contingent relationships *within* each of them, but we must avoid the mistake of concluding that because particular forms of social relations are contingent to particular modes of production, the converse is also true. It is not. As Buechler (1984:28) argues,

. . . it may be more fruitful to conceptualize patriarchy not as an independent dynamic system, but rather as a set of social relations which are continually adapted to and articulated through a system of class relations which is itself shaped and changed by the social dynamics of capitalism.

What does all this mean for the feminist geography research agenda that Foord and Gregson propose? We agree with the authors that a proper theoretical focus is patriarchal gender relations. But we stress that for such theory to be fruitful, it must be theorized conjointly with social relations in the capitalist mode of production. Thus while we also agree that feminist analysis of specific issues seen as specific contingencies which help reinforce or reproduce the structure of patriarchal gender relations, is important, we would suggest further that the structure of patriarchal gender relations as manifested in these specific contingencies need be analyzed in terms of their interaction (reproduction or contradiction) with other capitalist social relations. We also concur with the authors's focus on case study research design and intensive methods placed within a 'locality' framework (see Lauria and Knopp 1985, and Lauria 1985). But our formulation suggests that this analysis at the 'unique, individual, instance' has theoretical power (at the 'particular' level of analysis) as well.

Notes

1. We agree with Rubin (1975), however, that patriarchy should be thought of as a particular (in realist terms, 'contingent') form of the oppression of women. However, this distinction is not terribly important to the argument we are making here.
2. As a *contingent* form of patriarchal gender relationships their analysis (in terms of male definitions of 'real sex', etc.) is sound. We also believe that Foord and Gregson's analysis of patriarchal heterosexuality actually validates our contention that sexuality is a social construction — and contradicts their own earlier contention that 'heterosexuality' is a necessary relation for the concept 'gender relations'.

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