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WHERE IS FEMINISM IN PLANNING GOING? APPROPRIATION OR TRANSFORMATION?

Barbara Rahder and Carol Altilia
York University, Toronto, Canada

Abstract Despite feminism's contributions to planning theory and practice, it seems to be disappearing from the planning discourse. Drawing on the history of the feminist movement, experiences in the classroom, a scan of recent planning papers and publications, including some on planning curricula and women's prospects within the profession in Canada and the USA, questions are raised about the reasons for this apparent decline. The authors ask if postmodernism is undermining the feminist and anti-racism movements by combining complex and intersecting identities into an amorphous notion of diversity, rather than explicating the differential relations of power embodied in these differences.

Keywords diversity, feminism, gender, identity, postmodernism, women

Introduction

In many ways feminist thought has delivered fresh and exciting insights into the theoretical foundations of planning and their practical implications. For example, it has been instrumental in raising epistemological challenges to the positivist foundations of the rational-comprehensive model that underwrites planning traditions (Sandercock and Forsyth, 1992; Snyder, 1995). The feminist lens has reflected urban planning as based on inherently gendered assumptions about transportation, housing, human services and safety (Eichler, 1995). It has contributed substantially to the exploration of planning as a politically laden exercise, as producing and reproducing the unequal terms of gender relations. Feminism has called into question the very nature of planning as a 'profession' with its 'dominatory' execution and attendant masculine values. But what is the current state of feminism in planning? Is feminism disappearing from planning discourse? As educators, our 'sense' is that feminist influence, at least in the North American context, is in decline. Our experiences in the classroom, teaching planning theory in particular, and our conversations with other women in Canada and the USA suggest that the f-word – feminism – is on the way out.

The questions surrounding the health of feminist inquiry have been percolating for years and seem to feature speculation on at least two broad possibilities. Perhaps the emancipatory potential of feminism is well on its way to realizing its *transformative* impacts. As feminism broadens out to embrace the experiences and knowledges of others, gender becomes so fully integrated into our analysis of difference that it is barely visible. Setting aside our earlier gendered analysis for enhanced notions of community-based interest, this trend towards greater inclusiveness represents the positive evolution of the feminist project in planning.

Our experience makes us skeptical of this interpretation. If we are correct in our view that feminism is less visible in planning theory, it is possibly because women's issues have once again become marginalized. Has bringing in 'voices from the borderlands' (Sandercock, 1995) demanded that we loosen our grip on gender as a distinct category of analysis and if so, to what end? In our quest for a postmodern incarnation of planning, have we diluted the impact of feminism? The concern comes from recognition that the social justice potential of a pluralized framework is far from guaranteed. If subsumed within the discourse on 'diversity', difference as a key element in transformative politics is neutralized by homogenization, relegating all differences in identity, including gender, to a category of 'others'. The recession of feminism in planning theory could reflect this *appropriation*.

A brief history of feminism's ups and downs

Our concern that the balance is tipping away from the integration of feminist theory in planning is fuelled by considering the uneven history of feminism more generally and reflecting on its current sociopolitical context. The history of the original North American feminists, Native women, is virtually invisible. The so-called First and Second Waves of feminism have been undermined by forces internal, as well as external, to these movements. What is the prospect, then, for the Third Wave and beyond?

Many of the most basic tenets of feminist thought have unacknowledged precedents in Native culture. Allen (1992) recounts the ways in which historians have distorted much of Native history and culture by interpreting everything through their own European, patriarchal lens. The role of women, in particular, has been misunderstood, downplayed, and ignored (Allen, 1992: 30–42). Allen states that 'Traditional tribal lifestyles are more often gynocentric than not, and they are never patriarchal' (Allen, 1992: 2). Many traditional Native nations are egalitarian, having promoted democratic ideals – the 'red roots of white feminism' – for hundreds of years (Allen, 1992: 209–15). The invisibility of this history, even among feminists, is indicative of how easily important knowledge can be erased by more powerful and privileged social groups.

What is commonly referred to as the First Wave of Feminism, then, was merely the first for white women. Nonetheless, these 19th-century women reformers – many, but not all, of whom were prohibitionists, abolitionists, and suffragists – raised critical social issues of the time. The movement faltered, however, because of important ideological differences among feminists themselves. While some were fighting for equal rights in all spheres – inside and outside the home – others were champions of the view that women should be the moral caretakers of the home, the family, and society in general (Ginzberg, 2002). This fundamental division in views about women's roles in the world meant there was no agreement about the purpose or goals of the movement. These disagreements made feminism easy prey for those who opposed it – a cautionary tale that we would do well to avoid repeating.

The so-called Second Wave of feminism that began in the 1960s again involved women reformers – women in other social movements like the peace movement and the civil rights movement – whose experience of being marginalized within these broader social justice movements propelled them into questioning men's strangle-hold on positions of authority and leadership, generally (Evan, 2002). And while this Second Wave tended to express more consensus than the First, at least on issues of women's economic rights, its liberal feminist bias was eventually, and rightfully, challenged by the Third Wave.

The Third Wave raised critical questions about the tremendous diversity of women and ways of knowing excluded or silenced by liberal feminist

ideology. Much as the Second Wave challenged progressive men, the Third Wave challenged white women to re-examine their own contributions to the oppression of 'other' women. Issues of race, class, ability, sexual orientation, religion, etc. – all of the myriad ways in which we are socially and politically constructed by our differences – are now central to the feminist project, as is calling into question a universalizing feminist theory (Pinterics, 2001).

The feminists of this Third Wave may well have been among the first postmodernists. But what has been postmodernism's impact on feminist thought and experience? Has postmodernism diluted feminism and anti-racism? If so how? Does the postmodern critique necessarily lead to the abolition of 'women' as a relevant category of social and political analysis? Do deep and significant differences between women preclude any commonality? Where is feminism going? And, in particular, where is feminism going within planning? What have been the gains and losses along the way in the feminist journey into this field?

In this preliminary phase of our exploration of these questions, we consider some basic indications of the state of feminism in planning such as an examination of planning publications, conference presentations, teaching experiences, planning curricula, and trends in women's memberships in professional planning organizations. We conclude, not with any resolution, but with more questions than ever.

Classroom experiences

Our sense of concern was galvanized by an episode last year in a course on planning theory. As one of the authors began a class on feminist theory and planning, she was interrupted mid-sentence. A male student questioned the validity of studying feminist theory because, as he suggested, postmodern times had transcended feminism. Notably, he had not made similar claims against studying rational-comprehensive theory, advocacy theory, or any of the many other theories we had examined in the course to date. This scene begs the question whether or not he was intentionally acting in a manner designed to silence or challenge female authority, or assert his intellectual superiority as a man. These are not new themes in our experiences as female academics but because the challenge was directed at the relevance of feminism in particular, we were spurred to contemplate its more general reception. For example, the previous year, another student wrote on the course evaluation form, 'I have no time for feminism. We shouldn't have to read it.' Are these isolated cases of backlash or just the tip of the iceberg? Are these few expressing the views of a silent majority?

When students in planning theory classes have been asked over the years if they considered themselves feminists, the hands have dwindled as the size of the class grew (including the percentage of female students). Recently, this question was asked again at the end of the class on feminist theory and

planning, as it had been asked the week before. Where a few brave women had raised their hands the first week, the majority of women and many men raised their hands the second week. The difference was striking.

Rather than a backlash, many students had assumed that the feminist project was successful, and complete – that women had attained equality. Studying the history of feminism and examining the implications of feminist theory for planning opened their eyes to a gendered reality that they recognized in their own lives, but which they had not recognized as feminist. Feminists are sometimes accused of clinging to past grievances. Women who do not go out alone at night, or who live their lives in fear, women who are paid less than men with similar jobs, or who are repeatedly passed up for promotion without justification, women who cannot find affordable and appropriate housing, childcare, food, transportation, or services for themselves and their families, and so on would likely debate the obsolescence of feminist concerns. As the numbers of women murdered by their male 'loved ones' climb, and the numbers of women forced into poorly paid part-time jobs skyrocket, the grievances continue, but we apparently need to keep reminding each other that these issues are legitimate terrain for planners.

Planning curricula

A preliminary look at feminism in Canadian planning curricula produces some confusing results. According to Guererra and Horner (2003), while only half of the planning schools in Canada responded to their survey, all of those reported having directors who consider themselves feminist as well as running courses that include feminist planning theory and/or gender and development issues. In spite of this, the researchers concluded that feminist interests are only modestly represented in planning faculties and were not generally considered fundamental to the core planning curriculum or the mission of the planning program. Notably these results are drawn from those who were sufficiently interested in the survey to respond, perhaps providing a view of the most committed and leaving uncertainty about what is happening in the other programs. Still, this is a remarkable change from 1992, when only one planning school in Canada offered courses from a feminist perspective (Cook, 1993).

While feminism is visibly represented in our own planning curriculum, our in-class experiences reflect a decline in student interest in tackling feminism as a topic. In recent years, students have needed to be actively persuaded to select feminism from the variety of subjects specified for their mandatory in-class seminar presentation in planning theory. Similarly, in 2002 less than 6 percent of our planning students identified feminist ideas or concepts as relevant to their specialization within planning in spite of increasing proportions of women and 'visible minorities' in the program.

The planning profession

While the numbers of female planning students and female planners have steadily increased over the years, the numbers of the former have far outstripped the latter. In the USA, women have increased from only 4 percent of the planning students in the 1950s to almost 50 percent in 2000 (Sommer and Simpson, 2001). In Canada, women made up almost half of planning students by the mid-1990s (Rahder and O'Neill, 1998), and in Ontario, Canada's largest province, women currently represent 56.5 percent of all planning students (Ontario Professional Planners Institute, 2003).

Women planners have increased, too, but not at anywhere near the same rate. In the USA women made up only 10 percent of professional planners in the 1950s, but had increased to only about 28 percent by 1999 (Sommer and Simpson, 2001). In Canada, women still made up only 10 percent of the planning profession in 1976 (Klowdasky, 1985), but had increased to 28 percent by 1994 (MacGregor, 1994). In Ontario, women who were full members of the planning profession increased from 24 percent in 1995 to only 27.5 percent by 2003, while women who are provisional members went from 38 percent to 41 percent (Ontario Professional Planners Institute, 1995, 2003). Women members of the Royal Town Planning Institute of Great Britain were still at only 16 percent in 1994, despite increasing numbers in planning schools since the early 1980s (Greed, 1994).

This kind of decline from school to practice has been evident for some time now. Where are all the women planning graduates going, if not into the profession? An earlier survey of women planning graduates of our program found the most common reasons for not entering the profession (in order of frequency) were that they: (1) changed fields; (2) lacked employment opportunities; or (3) became a stay-at-home mother (Rahder and O'Neill, 1998). Perhaps more importantly, those that do become professionals (or planning academics) continue to face differential rates of pay and promotion, even when length of experience is taken into account (American Planning Association, 1997; Research Dimensions, 1997; Sommer and Simpson, 2001).

Papers and publications

Is there simply a disconnect between our classrooms and our own academic activities as feminist planners? Our preliminary look at papers and publications in the area offers more food for thought. While there are several methodological obstacles to a decisive review of planning papers and publications, some trends appear to emerge.[1]

Our efforts to examine conference papers reveal a decline in the number and proportion of papers on feminism, women and gender. Where such papers averaged 3–4 percent of the total papers presented at the

Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) conferences in the 1990s, this has declined to roughly 1 percent of the papers in 2002/03. Obviously, if there are fewer papers on women's issues we have fewer opportunities for focused discussion on such issues. Moreover, the debate continues about whether conference papers on gender are best scattered amidst others, which is good for exposing those who would otherwise ignore feminist perspectives, or best presented within a specially designated conference track, like ACSP's Gender and Diversity track, which may foster more creative feminist synergies.

An examination of core planning journals shows that feminism in planning enjoyed a peak in the early 1990s. The occurrence of articles focusing on 'feminism', 'women' or 'gender' as a key concept was at its highest at that time. Although these themes persist in planning theory, there seem to be some noteworthy shifts. The use of the word feminist and/or feminism as a key indication of content appears to have declined while the words gender and women have increased in use. It is impossible to determine if there has been a substitution of language or a decline in feminist analysis in this work but there is a reduction in volume either way – still represented in planning publications but to a lesser extent into the late 1990s. There has also been a notable change in the context for analysis, broadening considerably to include an international view of women's issues in planning. The most dramatic shift appears in the most recent work, however. From the late 1990s to the present there has been at best a small yet steady number of such articles featuring gender as a concern but a clear increase in the number on diversity or multiculturalism in planning. This inversion is curious. A cursory examination of material showing 'diversity' in planning as a key concept reveals the tendency to list gender as one of many identities for consideration. Race/ethnicity, gender, class (rarely dis/ability) appear to be emerging as the triumvirate of identity-conscious planning.

The clustering of identities poses a critical (but not novel) challenge for feminist planners. What is lost and what is gained by presenting gender as an equivalency? The answers are connected to the feminist debates on inclusion. Feminists have done well in recognizing that 'essentializing' gender identity renders invisible the differences among women but acknowledging those differences to the exclusion of a continuing discourse on 'woman' as a category can breed fracturing and paralysis. More importantly, rendering invisible the common threads in women's lives constricts the territory for political mobilization. We must be mindful that not all women are alike while continuing to contrast 'men and women', as the construction of this duality remains central to the continuation of patriarchy (Spelman, 1988).

In the same way, there is a danger in essentializing difference such that it is reduced to little more than an expression of variety. The contemporary discourse on 'diversity', as reflected in a variety of ways in culture and

thought, risks this oversimplification of difference. Such characterization misses the complications of intersecting identities (Sandercock, 2000). Expression of difference as 'diversity' allows the reading of social and cultural forms of difference in terms of descriptive plurality, at the same time dropping the social relationships that create difference out of sight. This dominant discourse becomes a useful ideology to practices of power as the 'diversity' concept presents the illusion of a horizontal space where all differences are equal. This simultaneously acknowledges difference while emptying it of its contents of inequity. What is gained is the erasure and occlusion of social relations of power (Bannerji, 2000). As Bannerji observes, this can become a replacement for a thorough examination of difference in terms of marginalization, oppression, and discrimination, neutralizing oppositional claims.

Political anesthetization or appropriation is facilitated, then, by the double-faced nature of this framework. While diversity includes the recognition of difference, it also ascribes identity, mimicking inclusion while ensuring 'otherness' (Jacobs, 1998). As urban observers, planners need only consider the treatment of difference in global cities to witness how such sanitization of difference dovetails with the broader social, political, and economic imperatives of post-Fordist and neoliberal agendas. While a diverse population is often celebrated as bringing a cosmopolitan character to global cities, at the same time the globalized economy operates to exacerbate racialized/gendered socio-economic polarization (Sassen, 2000). 'Diversity' in its catch-all approach to difference can operate to obscure the divide while securing the consent of the marginalized.

Conclusion

Many questions remain. Our intention at this point is to reopen the dialogue on this critical force in planning. History tells us that feminist ideas are vulnerable when internal debates are exploited to serve the work of patriarchy. Our experience suggests that we are again in a vulnerable place. We would like to invite discussion and reflect on the current direction of feminism and at the same time remain vigilant to the way in which our disagreements might be used against us. We believe that planners need to talk to one another about where feminism is in planning and where it is going. We are curious about how planners are engaging with feminism and to what extent they are consciously bringing it into planning theory, practice and education. Ultimately, we hope to work together on the strategies that will ensure that the overall political implications of planning remain or become an increasingly vital component in the broader feminist project.

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Note

1. The journals reviewed were restricted to those directly serving the field of planning such as *Journal of the American Planning Association*, *Journal of Planning Literature*, *Journal of Planning Education* and *Research, Planning Practice* and *Research, Environment and Planning* among others. Both database and in some cases manual searches were performed using search strings including feminist and/or feminism, gender, women, diversity and multiculturalism applied to title, keyword and abstract. We do not claim to produce an exhaustive analysis here. For example, it is clear that important work in the area is being published outside of these resources in more general feminist or social science publications. This in itself raises interesting questions about the place of feminism in planning.

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Barbara Rahder is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University in Toronto where she has been teaching planning theory and a variety of planning workshops for over a decade. Her research interests fall into three broad areas: (1) women & planning; (2) planning history, theory, and education; and (3) planning for equitable access to housing and community services.

Address: Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3. [email: rahder@yorku.ca]

Carol Altilia has been teaching and consulting in the area of gender, equity and diversity policy for over a decade. Her recent graduate work explores issues in urban planning for/with diverse populations. She is currently a research and funding analyst for the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University.

Address: Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3. [email: caltilia@yorku.ca]