

## STUCK IN THE POST: AN UNSYMPATHETIC CRITIQUE OF ANDREW SAYER'S "POSTMODERNIST THOUGHT IN GEOGRAPHY: A REALIST VIEW"

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Clive Barnett<sup>†</sup>

It is a recurrent strategy of any anxiety to defuse what it finds threatening by magnification or minimization, by attributing to it claims to power of which it is bound to fall short. If a cat is called a tiger it can easily be dismissed as a paper tiger; the question remains however why one was so scared of the cat in the first place. The same tactic works in reverse; calling the cat a mouse and then deriding it for its pretence to be mighty.

Paul de Man.

One might easily come away from reading Andrew Sayer's (1993) account of postmodernism in geography feeling thoroughly chastised and upbraided for ever having been tempted by the seductiveness of "pomo" ideas. So ridden with absurdity and paradox are they, it would seem, that they are hardly worthy of any serious attention that they might have attracted. But then one notices that what one has been a party to is something closely akin to one of those variety acts where a ventriloquist and his dummy exchange insults and blows on stage. The success of the whole spectacle depends on our willingness to suspend our deep suspicions that one of the combatants is in fact animated and given voice by the other.

That postmodernists will not be able to speak for themselves is announced from the very start: "The origins of these ideas are diverse, but *I shall dub them 'postmodernist' as a shorthand*" (emphasis not in original). Thus, the *unspeakability* of such ideas is established immedi-

<sup>†</sup> Department of Geography, University of Salford

ately. We are told that "seminal postmodernist thinkers" are not to be considered. Only their conduits (Dews, Norris, Rorty, Taylor, etc.) are quoted and referenced. In this move, the works of a particular type of Anglo-American intellectual, who acts as a critical intermediary between continental theory and our context, are appropriated as part of an exercise that discourages actually discovering such theories first-hand, flying in the face of those authors' intentions. The basic requirement as part of any critical understanding, of recognizing the specific disciplinary framings of different theories and ideas, is apparently superfluous to a realist analysis of postmodernism. Those who have shown the seeds of what has flowered into postmodernism are excluded from discussion, and with this founding exclusion goes any attempt to trace the acts of procreation, the properties of germination, or the conditions of ripening and of growth that have nourished it. Postmodernism, in geography as elsewhere, is the product of a series of (re)productive exchanges and of illicit couplings, and attitudes towards it are characterized by those emotions of love and hatred, desire and repulsion that accompanies the offspring of all such unholy trysts. As this bastard child takes its first tentative steps, an older sibling, only recently the center of so much adoring attention, jealously and viciously trips it.

Sayer's method of criticism is simple enough. Everywhere in postmodernism he finds logical fallacies. Postmodernist thought is "utterly contradictory" and marked by the "absurd consequences of the contradictions of relativism," or "patently self-contradictory" and overflowing with the "usual relativist dilemmas." It is, in short, nothing other than a "self-defeating skepticism," an "absurdity." He repeatedly invokes the Liar's Paradox, insisting that postmodernists cannot logically say what they say and mean it at the same time. But it is the suggestion, which underlies this well-worn strategy of refutation, that what is at stake in any form of conceptual argument is the truth validity of simple declarative statements, of the form "no-one died in the Gulf War," that is truly absurd, as well as being somewhat disingenuous. Sayer's relentless rooting out of what are apparently self-refuting paradoxes rests upon a stubborn denial of the performativity of language-use, how saying things is a means of "doing things with words." By employing such a restrictive conception of language, and consequently finding that postmodernism is indeed inhabited by paradox, illogicality and contradiction (and what critical discourse wouldn't be according to such criteria?), he mercilessly pokes fun and pours scorn upon it in equal measure. But one might wonder just who the joke is really on – the postmodernists who are openly decadent and playful, fast and loose in their relation to established ways of reasoning, or the critic who mobilizes the cheerless and intolerant humour of common-sense as his only resource against them. Gramsci (1971:441) pointed out that invoking

the inviolability of the "objective" real world in order to obtain the critical effect of "corrosive ridicule" is a strategy that has distinctly reactionary significance, and indeed Sayer routinely appeals to essentially conservative tactics to make his case – wielding the charges of relativism and idealism as self-evident pejoratives, and calling upon the unquestionable authority of formal logic to dispatch his chosen targets. The paper reads like nothing so much as an exercise in law-enforcement, as the author passes from case to case, alighting for just a moment at the points where each of the accused contravenes common-sense realism and the laws of logic. Having falsely accused an incorrectly identified defendant, who is then refused the right to a voice at the inquisition, Sayer doesn't hesitate in finding postmodernism guilty of both heresy and of perjury.

He adds little to our understanding of the issues raised by postmodernism, for he has an altogether different purpose – he is on a mission of conversion, and uses all the sleights of persuasion of the priestly rhetor in pursuit of his ends. He gladly reproduces the fantastic, petrified structure of non-debate in which the simple-minded labeling and dismissal of different theories as "essentialist," "foundationalist" and "totalizing," on the one hand, is met, on the other, with the defensive gesture of demanding that all these "discursive idealists" and "relativists" provide fool-proof philosophical rebuttals of "fascism." Given the choice between such alternatives, how reasonable and sensible realism is made to sound. But just how different would things appear if we were given a more sensitive rendering of the modes of thought which Sayer is happy to caricature?

What would a genuinely critical engagement with postmodernism consist of? Faced with this seemingly well-formed object, to which we are attracted despite ourselves, we should perhaps take the resolutely materialist path recommended by Marx and Engels in the text from which Sayer quotes approvingly at the beginning of his account, and start by tracing the social conditions of the production and circulation of different bodies of knowledge and ideology. Perhaps attention might be paid to the relationships between texts and contexts, however much, "after Derrida," such a project has been complicated. The question of the "origin" of ideas cannot be bracketed in any attempt to understand how they function once received in a new location, since that functioning is in no small part determined by the circumstances of their arrival. Paying attention to how gifts of new ideas reach their destinations is the basic requirement of any critical reception of them. This is our condition – to be forced to recognize the productivity of infectious cross-breeding, illegal trading, illegitimate exchanges, and surreptitious border-crossings, so that we might better take responsibility for the readings we make. We have only *theoretical monstrosities* (Derrida 1990) to

deal with, the products of countless contaminations. In such a condition, the existence of paradox should not be cause for rejecting ideas, but marks the very principle and dynamic of progress.

### References

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