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## Postmodern Feminism and Organization Studies: A Marriage of Inconvenience?

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### OPENING THOUGHTS

In her book *Secretaries Talk*, Rosemary Pringle (1989) describes a piece of public artwork called the 'Olympia' montage,<sup>1</sup> created in the mid-1980s by a community artist working with a group of secretaries in Sydney. Drawing on Foucault's (1979) emphasis on the productive rather than simply repressive capacity of power, Pringle recounts how the secretaries involved in the project attempted to subvert stereotypical perceptions of them:

Instead of rejecting or moralizing about these images she [the artist] recreates them in loving detail and plays with them. Here the naked reclining figure of Olympia the prostitute is brought together with every imaginable image of secretary, as sex object, femme fatale, temptress, worker, wife, mother, holding the boss in the palm of her hand and so on. The whole thing is lit up with flashing lights; it is flamboyant, garish, loud, and above all celebratory. It is constructed to create the possibility of multiple interpretations and indeed everyone who looks at it sees something different (Pringle, 1989: 103).

Here, Pringle touches on many of the themes that characterize postmodern feminism. The artist, as Pringle suggests, rejects a moral critique of stereotypical images

<sup>1</sup> The Sydney montage was based on Manet's 'Olympia', which itself was inspired by Titian's sixteenth century work 'Venus of Urbino'. When it was first exhibited in Paris in the 1860's what was reportedly thought to be most shocking about Manet's painting wasn't the female figure's nakedness, or even the accessories that clearly identified her as a courtesan, but rather her bold, fixed gaze. It is interesting then that one of the political features of the Sydney montage is that the reclining figure of Olympia was intended to be a reversal of what Foucault described as the 'disciplinary gaze' that controls and contains women's bodies and sexuality (for a more in-depth discussion of the latter within organization studies, see Bartky, 1990).

of secretaries, choosing instead to parody such images and so subvert their power. She 'plays' with stereotypical ideas about what it means to be a secretary, in all its various guises, in an outlandish, humorous way. She seizes the opportunity to challenge gender stereotypes regarding women's nature and sexuality, not by rejecting, but by celebrating them, emphasizing the multiplicity and constructed nature of gendered subjectivity. Instead of replacing what might be seen as partial or flawed knowledge with something 'better', she encourages us to deconstruct what it means to be a secretary, and a woman, self-consciously replacing one construction with another, the latter designed to encourage 'multiple interpretations', as Pringle puts it. There are no placards, no demonstrations, no lawsuits here, instead there are flashing lights and the reclining figure of Olympia in all her naked glory.

I have chosen to begin this chapter by thinking about the Olympia montage not only because, as Pringle herself suggests, it exemplifies many of the leitmotifs of postmodern feminism, but also because it highlights some of its inherent problems. On the one hand, the montage is powerful in its effects, challenging and potentially undermining established ways of thinking about gender, sexuality, and work. On the other hand, it arguably leaves the structural arrangements and power relations underpinning such ways of thinking intact. As Pringle emphasizes, the artist and the secretaries involved, as the 'authors' of the piece, could not determine its interpretation, nor could they ensure that the audience would not take the parody seriously; that is, as an affirmation of precisely the stereotypical meanings and cultural associations it was attempting to undermine. This leads us to ask, then, does such an approach to dealing with stereotypical images of women at work, and the power relations within which they are embedded, help us to take feminism forward, or does it undermine some of the very claims on which feminism is based, such as the importance of taking seriously the impact of gender ideology on women's experiences of work, or on the sexual harassment of women in the workplace? It is questions such as these that preoccupy our discussion throughout this chapter, focusing on the ontological, political, and epistemological issues postmodernism raises for feminist theory and its integration into the study of gender and work organizations.

The influence of postmodern thinking on feminist theory and politics has indeed provoked considerable debate. Feminist scholars have tended to view postmodernism either as an unprecedented opportunity for women to resist their designation as Other, or as a theoretical movement that is politically disabling. For some, feminism and postmodernism have entered into a relationship that is 'always creative' (Yeatman, 1994: 13), for others feminism occupies 'an anomalous position' with regard to postmodernism, one characterized by a 'relationship of unease' (Hekman, 1990: 1–2). For feminists such as Flax (1987), despite an obvious attraction to the emancipatory legacy of the Enlightenment with its espoused commitment to progress, feminist theory more properly belongs in the terrain of postmodernism, for feminist notions of the self, knowledge, and truth are too contradictory to those of the Enlightenment to be contained within its categories. Weedon (1997: 180) argues similarly that postmodernism offers feminism 'useful and important tools in the struggle for change'. While for others such as Benhabib (1995: 29), certain versions of postmodernism – particularly those that reject the largely modernist notion of a stable, coherent subject (such as those typified in the Olympia montage) – are

not only incompatible with feminism but ‘undermine the very possibility of feminism as the theoretical articulation of the emancipatory aspirations of women’.

Within work and organization studies, feminists have been critical of the ways in which modernist theories have devalued their concerns, conceiving of organizations as essentially gender-neutral (Acker, 1990; Alvesson and Due Billing, 1997; Gherardi, 1995). Their disaffection with the modernist legacy on which organization studies is founded led many feminists to develop an affinity with postmodern ideas. For many, the oppositional and disruptive contribution of postmodernism has offered an innovative and radical alternative to modernist accounts of organizational life, in understanding the relationship between organizational power, sexuality and the body (Brewis et al., 1997; Brewis and Linstead, 2000), feminism and organization theory (Calás and Smircich, 1993; 1996; 2006; Knights and Kerfoot, 2004), gender and organizational symbolism (Gherardi, 1995), and in deconstructing the gendered assumptions underpinning organizational practices (Martin, 1990).

Writing about feminist theory and organization studies in the mid-1990s, Calás and Smircich (1996: 237) observed how encounters between postmodern ideas and organization studies, ‘while growing, are still quite limited’. Some decade or so on, it seems fair to say that the impact of postmodernism can be felt quite widely within the field, having ‘come and gone’ as Burrell (2006: 156) has recently put it. Recounting the various aspects of the postmodern critique as it has impacted upon the study of gender and organizations, this chapter proceeds by reflecting on the term ‘postmodernism’, one that arguably often encourages misleading assumptions of a coherent body of ideas constituting a discrete intellectual movement. The ontological preoccupations of postmodernism are then considered with reference to their influence on critical analyses of gender and work, the emphasis here being upon a shift away from a largely dualistic, constitutive understanding of gender as an attribute, towards a more performative ontology emphasizing the ways in which gender is the outcome and not simply the basis of organizing processes. The epistemological concerns of postmodernism are then considered, linking these to the generation of feminist knowledge and to some of the problems postmodernism raises for organization studies in this respect. These concerns are then linked to a critical examination of the methodological consequences of postmodernism, emphasizing the impact of deconstruction – the search for meanings that have been denied or suppressed – upon gendered organization studies. The final part of the chapter argues that while the conceptual insights of postmodernism have made a significant contribution to the critical analysis of gender within organizations, its impact remains troubling, not least because of postmodernism’s problematic relationship to feminist theory and politics. As a possible way of addressing some of the more problematic tensions between feminism and postmodernism the work of feminist theorists who draw together insights from postmodern thinking and critical theory is considered as a potential way forward for feminist organization studies.

### POSTMODERNISM: A WORD OF WARNING

As indicated above, one of the main difficulties we face when considering the ideas of postmodern feminists is that the terms used to describe their work are often variable

and confusing. Broadly speaking, those writers whose work gets referred to as 'post-modern' tend not to apply the label to their own writing. Butler (1995: 35) for instance, who is often described as a postmodern, or poststructural feminist, has eschewed the term, describing it as 'too vague to be meaningful'.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the label 'postmodern' tends to be used in chapters such as this one in an attempt to make sense of some of the commonalities and differences in a relatively broad range of ideas. Indeed, the confusion surrounding the meaning of the term is hardly surprising, given that if postmodern ideas share anything in common it tends to be a rejection of the notion of a foundational truth or essence, one articulated through a representational language, in favour of an emphasis upon meaning as constructed, partial, and contingent. Another point of confusion derives from what has been described as the 'regrettable conflation' (Jones and Munro, 2005: 6) of postmodernism and poststructuralism. The former has often been used to refer to an historical period marked by uncertainty and fragmentation, while the latter has tended to describe a philosophical approach associated largely with contemporary French social theory (again, however, some writers refer to the former as postmodernity, and the latter as postmodernism).

These critical observations notwithstanding, however, in terms of its overall impact on work and organization studies, postmodernism has tended to be understood, both affirmatively and more critically, as a relatively coherent body of ideas, one that draws on the theoretical insights of an albeit rather disparate group of French philosophers and other social and cultural theorists in its critique of the modernist assumptions underpinning mainstream organization theory (see Hancock and Tyler, 2001; Hassard and Parker, 1993), and which is, indeed, often conflated with poststructuralism in this respect.<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of our engagement with postmodernism in this chapter, then, it makes sense to follow this trend and to identify certain themes or ideas that postmodern theorists share. Broadly speaking, therefore, and for the sake of clarity, we might argue that postmodern approaches to the study of organizations tend to share in common a discursive understanding of the self, an emphasis on truth as a socially contingent multiplicity, a conception of knowledge as the situated outcome of power relations, and an understanding of ethics as contextual and inter-relational. Drawing largely on Foucault, postmodern approaches to organization studies also tend to be characterized by a view of power as both a repressive and a productive capacity (see Burrell, 2006 for an extended discussion of the impact of Foucault's writing on postmodernism and organization studies).

A particularly important orientation within postmodern theory derives from the idea that human existence and experience is located inescapably within language.

<sup>2</sup> Although his work is seen by many to advocate a form of critique that represents a clear break with the utopian and universalizing tendencies of modernist thinking, Michel Foucault similarly explicitly rejected the label 'postmodern' in interviews, reminding us (as Giddens, 1991, has subsequently) that a critique of Enlightenment thinking was a feature of the work of many philosophers of the modern period (see Hancock and Tyler, 2001, for an extended discussion of the relationship between critical modernism and poststructuralism).

<sup>3</sup> Brewis (2005a) for instance uses the term 'poststructuralist/postmodernist' in her discussion of Calás and Smircich's work.

This means that power is exercised not only through direct coercion, but also through the way in which language shapes and restricts our understanding of reality. However, because language is not static, but is continually open to re-interpretation, it can also be used to challenge and resist its repressive powers, and so language is seen as an important site of political struggle. Extrapolating out from this analysis, postmodern feminists have argued that if gender is constructed discursively (that is, through the power effects of language), then it can be re-constructed, for the gendered self is not a static, pre-social given, but rather the outcome of power relations. It is a rejection of the self as a pre-social given, in favour of a performative ontology (an understanding of the self as socially or discursively constructed) that has arguably proven to be the most controversial and significant motif of postmodern feminism, for the self has long been a key concern of feminist theory. It is a concept that is central to understanding the ways in which aspects of our being such as identity, embodiment, agency and of course, work are engendered, and it is a mobilization of the gendered self that has been the foundation of feminist theory and politics throughout its history.

### POSTMODERNISM AND GENDERED SUBJECTIVITY AT WORK

Feminists influenced by postmodernism tend to reject a dualistic, representational view of gender as a relatively stable identity (Oakley, 1972), in favour of an emphasis on gender as a social practice that is both multiple and provisional (Bruni et al., 2005; Poggio, 2006; Pullen, 2006). For writers such as Butler (1988; 1993; 2000 [1990]), gender becomes ritualized through constant acts of repetition and through the recitation of particular cultural reference points, the effects of which make it appear natural, as opposed to gender being the 'natural' expression of a pre-social given. While this understanding of gender as something that we 'do' as opposed to something that we 'have' or 'are' is certainly not unique to postmodern feminism, but rather has a long history within feminist thinking, arguably beginning with De Beauvoir's (1988 [1949]: 295) contention that 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman', and developed most notably in West and Zimmerman's (1987: 125) understanding of gender as 'a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction',<sup>4</sup> what makes postmodern feminist writing distinct is its performative gender ontology. The latter somewhat controversially takes this 'doing gender' perspective to the extreme, emphasizing that gender is not simply something that we perform as social actors, rather its very performance brings us into being. When Butler argues for instance that 'this repetition [of gender "acts"] is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what *enables* a subject' (Butler, 1993: 95, original emphasis), she emphasizes that gendered subject positions are continually evoked through stylized forms of interaction, without which gender does not exist – these very acts of repetition are what constitute gender, and gendered subjects, simultaneously.

While gender is effectively constituted performatively, however, it is not arbitrary or free-floating for writers such as Butler, but rather is compelled in particular ways

<sup>4</sup> See also Acker (1990) for an application of this 'doing gender' perspective to the study of organizations.

and through certain discursive regimes such as what she describes as the 'heterosexual matrix' – an ontological-epistemic schema that organizes sex, gender, and desire dualistically and hierarchically, privileging hegemonic masculinity (Butler, 2000). Again, further developing the 'doing gender' approach outlined above, the enactment of gender according to the terms of the heterosexual matrix involves a constant process of what Butler describes as 'un/doing' (Butler, 2004) through which, in order to be recognized as viable, the subject 'produces its coherence at the cost of its own complexity' (Butler, 1993: 115). What she means by this is that in bringing gender into being, the complexity of lived experience in all its multiplicity becomes conflated into a performance that conforms to the normative expectations perpetuated by the heterosexual matrix, in order for men and women to be accorded recognition as viable subjects – to be seen as 'employable', within the labour market, for instance (Hancock and Tyler, 2007). Yet as Pullen and Knights (2007), following Butler, have emphasized the terms on which we are accepted as viable may make our lives difficult if not impossible to live, while the alternative (of not fitting in, or of being denied recognition), may be equally as difficult. Hence women (and men) who fail to conform to what is defined as normal, natural and viable in gender terms themselves become 'undone'. In other words, they lose a sense of self and of their place in the world, by being socially ostracized or economically disadvantaged (for instance, by being denied educational or employment opportunities).

Simpson and Lewis (2007: 16) sum up the postmodern feminist development of this 'doing gender' approach when they argue that for postmodernists, 'gender is performative in that feminine and masculine are not what we are or traits we have but effects we produce by way of what we do'. As they outline, this performative production of gender is instigated in a myriad of different settings and in a wide range of different ways including, of course, what we do for and within organizations. For those influenced by a postmodern understanding of the self, gender is an ongoing process, one that has to be continually re-enacted and re-inscribed in accordance with the cultural norms defining masculinity and femininity at any given time, and in any given context. Alvesson's (1998) study of gender relations and identity work in a Swedish advertising agency emphasizes this, highlighting the role of organizations in the social and linguistic construction of gender. The men and women in his study continually re-negotiate their identities in accordance with gendered organizational norms and expectations, revealing how the organization is not a gender-neutral backdrop, but rather a site of contestation and struggle in this respect. Similarly, Kondo's (1990) ethnographic study of identity construction in the work-based communities she studied in Japan represents a rich and detailed account of the ways in which masculinities and femininities are crafted and performed in accordance with a range of organizationally sedimented cultural norms associated with gender and the many other aspects of identity with which it is interwoven in her narrative. Here Kondo emphasizes how, in order to be accepted as viable subjects, the women in her study (including herself as the author/researcher/narrator) had to carefully craft their performance of self in accordance with culturally sedimented expectations. In this sense, Kondo draws attention particularly to the ways in which the women she writes about had to continually mediate between different aspects of their identities, as these were lived and experienced.

Studies such as these tend to articulate the performative ontology outlined above in the view that gender is a performative social (organizational) practice (Gherardi, 1995; Poggio, 2006). Developing this position, Gherardi (1995) in particular, in emphasizing the role of organizational symbolism in gender performance, has highlighted both how gender is 'done' at work, and how organizations 'do' gender, stressing (much like Alvesson and Kondo) that organizations are far from gender-neutral backdrops against which we practice gender, but rather play an active role in gender performativity. For Gherardi, while complex, ambiguous and continually re-negotiated, gender hierarchy is maintained through the ceremonial and remedial work underpinning its symbolic ordering. In her account, gender symbolism is maintained, reproduced, and culturally transmitted through the ceremonial work that takes place within organizations, while remedial work restores the symbolic order of gender following instances when it has been challenged. In this sense, her approach not only articulates a performative ontology, but also echoes a postmodern understanding of gender power relations, drawing attention to power as both a repressive force and a productive capacity, emphasizing how gender is a site of continual contestation and struggle in this respect, a theme to which we now turn.

### PERFORMATIVITY AND FEMINIST (ORGANIZATIONAL) POLITICS

In many ways, this performative aspect of postmodern feminist thought, and especially its articulation as a compelled style of becoming in Butler's writing, owes an important debt to De Beauvoir's (1988, 295) earlier work (written in the 1940s) in its emphasis on becoming gendered as an ongoing social process, as suggested above. However, rather than seeking to overcome women's otherness in the way that De Beauvoir urged women to, some postmodern feminists advocate celebrating women's alterity, arguing that their relative marginalization enables women to challenge and undermine that from which they are excluded through the use of irony and parody; hence, rather than a burden to be overthrown, women's otherness is conceived of as 'a space to be reclaimed' (Calás and Smircich, 1996: 236). As suggested by the Olympia montage described above, the political emphasis of postmodern feminism, then, is largely (but by no means exclusively) on humour, irony, and parody.

Postmodern approaches emphasize therefore that performative shifts can parody dominant norms, revealing their own performativity. This means that purportedly queer activities like drag for instance, have the potential to reveal the arbitrariness of conventional gender distinctions and identities by parodying and so undermining them. Developing this largely Foucauldian line of critique, one that emphasizes the productive as opposed to merely repressive capacity of power, and focusing on subjectivity and identity in the organization of gendered appearance at work, Brewis et al. (1997) argue that the social construction of gender, as a power effect of discourse, allows for gender difference to be resisted. Their analysis of two forms of gender-inappropriate dress (male transvestism and female power dressing), emphasizes that gender as a binary divide only exists because we comply with its governmental effects, namely because we continue to behave as either men or women. Echoing Butler's emphasis on drag as a parodic redeployment of power, Brewis et al.'s

account therefore emphasizes how gender-inappropriate dress 'illuminates the artificial nature and self-production of gender at the same time as it helps us interrogate the power structures that are founded upon this artificial divide' (Brewis et al., 1997: 1298).

Adopting a similarly Foucauldian approach, emphasizing the productive and potentially disruptive power of sexuality at work, Pringle (1989: 166) argues that 'sexual pleasure might be used to disrupt male rationality and to empower women'. In her study of secretaries referred to above, Pringle outlines how, in her view, post-modernism's parodic emphasis on a politics of play has much to offer to a feminist attempt to deploy mimicry and ridicule tactically within the workplace. In her account of the working lives of secretaries, Pringle argues that, particularly in their use of office humour, secretaries parody themselves and their bosses to powerful effect. Making comparisons between the subversive effects of these practices and those of the Olympia montage outlined earlier, Pringle draws attention not only to the pleasure derived from ridiculing and exaggerating cultural stereotypes, but also to the potential political impact of ridicule. While she acknowledges that such practices are necessarily localized, sporadic, and spontaneous, and that to dispense with other political strategies in favour of an emphasis on parody would be a regressive move for feminism, she nonetheless argues that parody has an important place in a postmodern-inspired feminist politics, one that seeks to reclaim, rather than overcome, women's designation as Other, at the same time as emphasizing gender multiplicity.

As Knights and Kerfoot (2004) outline however, one of the inherent dangers in seeking to 'reclaim' women's otherness within work and organization studies lies in the potential for the re-appropriation of a more homogenized conception of what it means to be a woman into the managerial mainstream. Here they echo Calás and Smircich's earlier (1993) critique in which they argued that rather than challenging the hegemonic status of masculinity in managerialism, the 'women in management' literature (Rosener, 1990; Helgesen, 1995) serves rather to reinforce it because feminine subjectivities are themselves constructed within the terms of hegemonic masculinity within this literature, against which women are positioned as an (albeit in this case desirable) alternative. Building on this critique, Knights and Kerfoot outline how the history of feminism has tended to pursue one of two strategies in responding to the bifurcation and hierarchical ordering of gender; either humanist (including liberal and Marxist) feminists seek to dismantle the bifurcation itself, and hence the hierarchy through which it comes to be organized, or (more radical, or cultural) feminists tend to favour a reversal of the hierarchy, claiming various forms of ontological, epistemological or ethical superiority for women. Within organization studies, as Knights and Kerfoot note, the former strategy has tended to underpin equal opportunities discourse and the liberal feminist agendas with which it has been associated, in practice leading to an emulation of masculine performativity, whereas the latter emphasizes a celebration of women's ways of being. In terms of its appropriation into mainstream managerial thought, the latter has been articulated in recent writing on 'managing diversity', and especially so in the 'women in management' literature (see Brewis and Linstead, 2009 for a summary), emphasizing the suitability of the skills and characteristics attributed to women to the demands of

management within contemporary work organizations. We also of course see these assumptions reflected in women's over-representation in sales-service work, particularly that involving the performance of emotional, aesthetic, and sexualized forms of labour. Rather than a rationale for marginalization or exclusion, such attributes are therefore argued to be the basis of women's inherent or acquired superiority, ascribing to women a more relational style of working, managing, and leading that is thought to be particularly appropriate to the demands of contemporary service-orientated market economies (see also Hatcher, 2003 for a critique).

For Knights and Kerfoot (2004: 432), both of the above positions, the former vindicating hegemonic masculinity, the latter elevating a homogenized, even essentialized femininity, 'reproduce a gender binary steeped in hierarchy'. In an attempt to circumvent this bifurcation (and appropriation) of feminist thinking, Knights and Kerfoot draw on feminist theorist Susan Hekman (1999) to argue the case for a third, postmodern strategy for feminism, one that denies a single unitary truth (either of women's relative disadvantage, or superiority) and promotes an ontology within which multiple versions of gender reality prevail. According to this alternative position, differences between men and women are not seen as illegitimate deviations from the one true standard, nor as marketable novelties, but rather as 'simply a part of the rich texture of human life and experience' (Knights and Kerfoot, 2004: 433). Yet, the problem of arbitrating between these different 'textures' arguably remains, a point that haunts postmodern feminist ways of thinking about truth and knowledge.

### FEMINIST AND POSTMODERNIST CONCEPTIONS OF TRUTH AND KNOWLEDGE

Among the key ideas that feminism and postmodernism share in common is what Lyotard (1984: xxiv) described as an 'incredulity to metanarratives'; that is, a mistrust of totalizing theories that seek to explain everything, often with reference to a single causal factor such as capitalism or patriarchy. Indeed, feminists have criticized many of the metanarratives of Western thought for ignoring or trivializing gender, or for assuming that the differences between men and women are pre-social. Postmodern feminists argue that truth claims are not neutral but rather gender-specific reflections of power. However, metanarratives have often played a crucial role in feminist political struggles, not least in terms of advancing a feminist agenda within the workplace. Enlightenment ideas about progress, emancipation and rights have been fundamental to feminist theory and politics, in the fight for political representation and protective legislation, or for equal treatment or pay, for instance. Hence, while some feminists have sought to produce their own metanarratives, working with the legacy of their forefathers (Marxist feminist theories of capitalism, or liberal feminist critiques of sex discrimination, for instance), or against it (radical feminist accounts of patriarchy), others have sought to deconstruct established metanarratives, and to develop new ways of thinking and writing that insist on theoretical specificity and no longer claim universal or 'meta' status, the latter arguing that science is little more than 'a collection of stories about how the world is made' (Gherardi, 1995: 38).

Feminists who adopt a postmodern approach argue then for the need to deconstruct truth claims and analyse the power effects that claims to truth entail – to recognize, as Foucault (1980) argued, that knowledge is an inextricable aspect of power, and vice versa. It is therefore necessary to focus on knowledge as opposed to truth, not as representational of it, not only because there is no foundational truth, but because there is no external reality that can arbitrate between competing truth claims. For postmodern feminists, there is no one truth, no privileged knowledge; all knowledge is historically and culturally specific, the product of a particular discourse. The power of particular discourses depends on the extent to which their truth claims are successful – the extent to which the knowledge they produce is accepted as true, often because it is produced and disseminated by relatively powerful actors. In this sense, some feminists have argued that the epistemological politics of postmodernism are its ‘most determinate and perhaps most interesting feature’ (Yeatman, 1994: 13), leading to a questioning of the very basis of feminist theory.

In terms of the application of these ideas and debates to the generation of feminist knowledge within organization studies, as Pullen (2006: 277) notes, the bifurcation of feminist identity politics outlined above ‘typically requires researchers to do one of two things: to suppress the feminine, and write implicitly as a male, or to adopt a textual position as ‘woman’ that fails to do justice to the complex and unstable multiplicity that underpins the research self’. Emphasizing the methodological importance of a reflexive appreciation of the multiple self, a position that elides the bifurcation outlined by Pullen, Fournier’s (2002: 82–83) study of women farmers in Italy provides, as she puts it, ‘living examples of the temporal, contextual and shifting nature of the category of “woman” emphasized by poststructural feminists’. The women in her research were composites of various inter-related identities: they were ‘peasants’ on the margins of the urban bourgeoisie, ‘women’ in a male dominated way of life, ‘farmers’ rather than farmers’ wives, and environmentally aware sustainable agriculturalists. Although often tactically deploying one or the other of these components of their identity, the women in Fournier’s research resolutely refused her attempts to settle them into any one category. Methodologically, this implies that ‘at the centre of analysis is no longer a static object, but rather a fluid process, a situated performance’ (Poggio, 2006: 229).

In researching gender as a ‘situated performance’ premised upon the performative ontology outlined above, Patricia Yancey Martin (2006) has argued for the development of research methodologies that ‘catch in action the practicing of gender at work’. Joanne Martin’s (1990) deconstruction<sup>5</sup> of the story, told on NBC news, by the president and CEO of a large, multinational corporation known for its humanitarian treatment of employees, of a young woman who reportedly arranged to have a Caesarean in order to be prepared for the launch of a major new product, is a widely cited example of just such an approach. Through a series of deconstructive moves followed by what she describes as an emancipatory ‘reconstruction’, Martin’s analysis emphasizes how the gender conflicts implicit in this story are suppressed, and shows how apparently well-intentioned organizational practices can reify rather

<sup>5</sup>In postmodern thinking, deconstruction is based largely on the work of Jacques Derrida. For an extended discussion of the relationship between feminism and deconstruction, and of the consequences of Derrida’s writing for feminist thinking, see Elam (1994).

than alleviate gender inequalities. Martin therefore deploys deconstruction as both a methodological and a political strategy in so far as her analysis undertakes both a recovery of meanings hidden within the text, as well as a discussion of the political context and consequences of these hidden meanings.

A similar methodological approach is developed and advocated by Bruni et al. (2005) in their reflexive, ethnographic study of entrepreneurship, focusing on how enterprise cultures are gendered and experienced, and on how gender as a social practice is both implicated and explicated in the 'doing' of entrepreneurship. Their account develops a critical analysis of the discursive practices involved in constructing the entrepreneur as gendered, showing how language and its mobilization in cultural practices and forms of interaction is an important mechanism through which entrepreneurship becomes gendered as masculine. Drawing on Foucault's (1979) critique of governmentality – the organized practices and 'ensembles of actions' through which subjects are induced to regulate themselves in order to behave in desired ways – they argue that 'an entrepreneurial discourse is mobilized as a system of thinking about the nature of the practice of entrepreneurship . . . which is able to make some form of that activity thinkable and practicable, both to its practitioners and to those upon whom it is practiced' (Bruni et al. 2005: 11). In other words, for the women in Bruni et al's study who 'acted' as entrepreneurs, their performance was undertaken with an eye to dominant (gendered) ideas about who or what an entrepreneur is, and about how the role of 'entrepreneur' should be acted out in order to be convincing. For the women in their study, this often involved them 'switching' between different (often competing) gender hegemonies, governing for instance, dominant social discourses shaping identities such as 'entrepreneur', 'employer', 'wife', 'mother', and so on.

### POSTMODERN FEMINISM AND ORGANIZATION STUDIES: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS AND ANTICIPATIONS

Some years on from the wave of postmodernism that hit gender studies in the 1980s and early 1990s, organizational scholars are now arguably in a position to reflect on its impact, and to begin to discern new directions for theory and research based not only on the contribution made by advocates of postmodernism, but also on the notes of caution sounded by its critics. On the one hand, some have viewed postmodernism as a liberatory force, one that has freed feminism from its modernist legacy. On the other hand, postmodern ideas have been viewed with suspicion and scepticism, as a paralysing obstruction incompatible with the emancipatory impetus of feminism as a political movement. Not least this is because postmodern feminism implies that gender oppression has no single cause or solution; postmodern feminism is therefore criticized for offering no clear way forward for feminist theory or politics. The anti-epistemological relativism with which postmodernism has often been associated, combined with its emphasis on multiple truths, has also been thought to undermine feminist knowledge and the truth claims on which it is based.

Postmodern approaches to work and organization studies have often been accused of relativism (Thompson, 1993), and of absolving organizational scholars of

the responsibility to engage in a sustained moral critique of the injustices associated with prevailing relations of domination and degradation (Parker, 1995). This particular line of critique is especially problematic for feminism given the latter's truth claims regarding gender oppression and exploitation. This means that some feminists see postmodernism as a threat to its emancipatory potential as a political movement (Benhabib, 1995), emphasizing that much of the feminist critique hinges on the claim that the oppression of women is irrational, unreasonable and unethical. Hence, 'if we want to argue for changing, rather than merely deconstructing, some of the myths of femininity that have lingered for centuries, we need to admit to holding a rational position from which to argue this' (Nicholson, 1990: 39).

All in all then, for some, postmodernism has proved to be a 'fatal distraction' (Thompson, 1993: 181). Yet, as this and other relationship metaphors cited at the outset of our discussion suggest even for its most outspoken critics, postmodernism has been something of a seductive force within feminism and organization studies alike. Critical scholars within both fields, and particularly in the intersections between the two, have found themselves drawn to its insights and ideas for a number of reasons, not least because it has asked many awkward questions of the ontological, epistemological, political, and ethical assumptions underpinning both areas, and has provided a point of departure for those who have tried to develop radical and innovative ways of studying organizations, and of drawing attention to previously marginalized or overlooked aspects of organizational life such as symbolism, sexuality, and the body for instance (Brewis and Linstead, 2000; Gherardi, 1995; Wolkowitz, 2006).

In terms of its overall impact, the work of postmodern theorists has been stimulating in raising new questions about the nature of feminism, and of work and organization studies, and particularly so in encouraging a more reflexive approach to the study of gender and work (Brewis, 2005b; Pullen, 2006). As outlined at the outset, those feminists who have advocated a closer engagement between feminism and postmodernism have emphasized that feminist notions of the self, of knowledge, truth, politics, ethics and so on, are too contradictory to those of the Enlightenment to be contained within the legacy of its concepts and categories. Others have noted however, that there is something of an 'uneasy alliance' (Benhabib, 1995) between feminism and postmodernism. Arguably, then, what many of the concepts and ideas discussed in this chapter suggest is that, at least in terms of its integration into work and organization studies, attempts to categorize feminism as either modernist or postmodernist are problematic, and overly simplistic, for in many ways it is both and neither. This is a position that has been articulated particularly by feminist writers such as Nancy Fraser (1995: 60) who argue that rather than choosing between postmodern insights and critical theory feminism instead 'might reconstruct each approach so as to reconcile it with the other'. Indeed, within feminist theory there is a rich body of work that has been produced in recent years by feminists influenced by postmodernism, critical theory and phenomenology yet which has been relatively neglected by organizational scholars (see Benhabib, 1995; Gatens, 1996; Grosz, 1994; Young, 2005). Such writing emphasizes in particular that gender is a situated social practice, so that the gendered self comes into being not merely through performative iteration and recitation, but through the positioning of the embodied

self *in situation* (Benhabib, 1995), particularly through the gendered division of labour and its relationship to embodiment as the materiality of gender subjectivity (Young, 2005). Feminist critical theory, as it has been articulated in the work of corporeal feminists (see for instance, Diprose, 1994; 2000; Gatens, 1996; Grosz, 1994; Young, 2005), and particularly in Australian feminism (see Caine et al., 1998 for a discussion), adopts a largely performative ontology of gender, but also brings materiality and embodiment to the fore, drawing attention to the material circumstances that compel or constrain gender performativity.<sup>6</sup> This work potentially has much to offer to our understanding of gender and organization, emphasizing as it does the gendered self not as unencumbered in a humanist or postmodernist sense, but rather, as situated, organized. Such an approach recognizes that the process of becoming gendered is 'embodied, situated and fundamentally political' (Gatens, 1996: 136), a perspective that opens up important questions regarding the nature and role of organizations in this respect. At the very least, this body of work emphasizes the need for a critical, reflexive appreciation of the gendered subject based on a rejection of the Enlightenment concept of the disembodied, disembedded self that continues to dominate mainstream work and organization studies, as well as a re-working of the postmodern, performative self considered here that, in its current formulation at least, arguably sits uncomfortably with the emancipatory aspirations of feminism. Potentially, then, it opens up an important dialogue for feminist theory and organization studies in the future, constituting an as yet relatively neglected body of ideas, one that has emerged largely from a critical exchange between feminism, postmodernism, and critical theory (see Benhabib et al., 1995) yet which, as noted above, organizational scholars have yet to engage with.

In sum, over the last two decades or so postmodernism has posed a number of challenges to deterministic and reductive accounts of organizational life, reinvigorating organization theory with a series of questions that have arguably encouraged the development of more reflexive approaches to the study of organizations, drawing for instance on post-colonialism (Jones, 2005) and queer theory (Parker, 2002; Borgerson, 2005). Such approaches have forced feminists to acknowledge differences among men and women, to problematize the notion of homogenous gender categories, and also to appreciate the implications this recognition has for political solidarity resting on a singular identity. Yet at the same time, feminism has been in danger of proceeding without a discernible subject for grounding theory and practice. As noted at the outset of this chapter, and as Jones and Munro (2005: 2) remind us in their exegesis of contemporary organization theory, 'theory is always a creation and a production', one that opens up different ways of thinking and acting. It is in their respective ways of opening up organization theory, sometimes in coalescence, sometimes in conflict, that postmodernism and feminism have perhaps

<sup>6</sup>It is important to recognize, however, that a recurring theme in Butler's writing, notably in *Bodies That Matter* (Butler, 1993) as well as her more recent work, is also the materialization of gender. However, because Butler has tended to be read, particularly within organization studies (see Borgerson, 2005) as a largely postmodern or poststructuralist writer, the more phenomenological aspects of her thinking have often been eclipsed by a preoccupation with her emphasis on gender performativity. As Butler herself notes in this respect, this has led to her feeling accused of 'forgetting the body' (Butler, 1993: ix).

most in common, for both have asked awkward and inconvenient questions, undermining many of the assumptions on which organization studies has been based. While for some this is to its political detriment, for others, including many of those concerned to understand the ways in which gender and organization are mutually implicated, and to continue to expand the rich body of ideas on which organization theory draws, this is to the benefit of its continual revivification.

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