A Question of Modernity?

Hetherington’s sociology of modernity

In The Badlands of Modernity, Kevin Hetherington (1997) anchors his interpretation of Foucault’s (1998a) concept of heterotopia within the evolution of specific social spaces during the formative years of modernity. He explores three specific examples of heterotopia: the Palais Royal in Paris, Masonic Lodges and early factories of the industrial revolution. I will analyse Hetherington’s interpretation and application of heterotopia in relation to, firstly, his definition of the concept, secondly, his placing of the concept within modernity and, finally, his conceptual underpinning. I will argue that although Hetherington opens up many fruitful features of and questions about heterotopia, particularly in the context of the late eighteenth century, his underlying arguments are in some respects unhelpful and confusing.

Hetherington refers to little detail of Foucault’s descriptions of heterotopia and uses the term rather loosely and generally. For instance, he assumes, without substantiation, that heterotopia has been implied through a range of notions such as ‘paradoxical space’ (Rose, 1993: 150-155) and ‘marginal space’ (Lefebvre, 1991 and Shields, 1991), even though the term has not been used by these specific theorists. He defines heterotopia as different places which provide either an unsettling or an alternative representation of spatial and social relations (Hetherington, 1997: 8). The sites are incongruous in some way and display ‘different modes of ordering’. Hetherington is particularly keen to distance heterotopia from notions of transgression and resistance, but unfortunately switches backwards and forwards between describing the sites as either ‘alternate’ (one thing and then another) or ‘alternative’ (one instead of another) in their ordering process. The distinction between the words is lost and the definition of heterotopia becomes confusing. By defining heterotopia very broadly, Hetherington also suggests that they are an important feature of Foucault’s overall work. He makes some sweeping, unsubstantiated claims:

… it is Foucault who has most clearly developed the concept of heterotopia and suggested its importance to understanding the spatiality of the social ordering of modernity (1977, 1984, 1986a, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c)… (40)
In the above quotation, I have included Hetherington’s six references to Foucault’s work. However, scant evidence is presented to suggest that Foucault developed the concept of heterotopia through these books. When the spatial aspect of Foucault’s other major works are discussed by Hetherington, the prison, asylum and hospital are lumped together and defined within a ‘metaphor of the panopticon’ without any indication of the subtle breadth and variety of Foucault’s approaches to these spaces (111).

Overall, Hetherington describes heterotopia as laboratories for experimenting with new ways of ordering society. His first example of a heterotopic site is the *Palais Royal* at the time of the French Revolution. The *Palais Royal* at this period is depicted as a diverse social space for the enlightened bourgeoisie, incorporating gardens, theatres, cafes and a range of new commercial activities. However, as Hetherington outlines, it was also the haunt for ordinary folk to find pleasure in festivities and spectacles as well as a centre for gambling, prostitution and political agitation. One of Hetherington’s most powerful arguments is that the *Palais Royal* combined transgressive elements with subtle forms of control. In this he wants partly to critique those who, influenced by such writers as Bakhtin, have ‘valorized’ the margins in terms of sites of resistance and otherness (see Shields, 1991). Hetherington, heavily influenced by Stallybrass and White’s, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1996: 18-34) wants to argue that these sites produced another ‘mode of ordering’ rather than a radical break. Bakhtin and those influenced by his thought have tended nostalgically to overplay the freedoms allowed by the authorities and ignored the diverse manner in which the events were moderated and controlled (Hetherington1997: 30).

At first glance, Hetherington’s description of the *Palais Royal* is suggestive and seems to chime with aspects of Foucault’s examples of heterotopia, but he wishes to take things much further by making two big claims. Firstly, he argues that the *Palais Royal* can be seen as a ‘metaphor for modernity’. Secondly, he asserts that heterotopia, and by implication, modernity itself, are characterised by combining, in new ways, aspects of social control and expressions of freedom (6). Hetherington wants to replace the simple divide between social order/margins with a notion involving process, mobility and ambiguity:

Ordering and disordering go together, as do centres and margins, in ways that are tangled, uncertain and topologically complex. (7)
One major difficulty here is that Hetherington does not corroborate his conception of modernity and social ordering. He outlines two broad and conflicting ‘traditions’ and then mixes them up to provide his new conception. On the one hand, referring generally to Bauman, he depicts notions of modernity as linked to the ideas of the enlightenment that stress progress, order and control. On the other, referring broadly to Berman, he outlines a version of modernity that emphasises change, flux and transience (10). He wishes to replace these traditions with one that contains uncertainty and ambiguity, and which can be seen in the ordering processes that emerged at the time of modernity’s formation. Jameson, in discussing the recent upsurge of academic interest in modernity, argues that to apply the term always involves a disproportionate excitement. Such an intensity of feeling emerges through discovering a new angle or twist to the tale of modernity, reorganising what has gone before and setting out a novel schema or a breaking of traditional paradigms. The rewriting process takes priority over the historical insights that are offered. Modernity for Jameson is therefore a narrative category rather than a concept:

What I want to underscore… is the way in which to affirm the ‘modernity’ of this or that historical phenomenon is always to generate a kind of electrical charge…. to awaken a feeling of intensity and energy that is greatly in excess of the attention we generally bring to interesting events or monuments of the past. (Jameson, 2002:35)

Osborne argues that problems of dichotomisation undermine sociological theories of modernity; they ‘over-dramatise’ and condense features of social change to one or two basic elements (1998: 19). To try to rewrite the story of modernity again surely requires utmost circumspection? To reduce modernity to a ‘middle way’ between order and freedom seems too simple. Hetherington wishes to collapse a binary, but actually retains it through overworking each side too heavily.

Hetherington also argues for a strong link between modernity, heterotopia and utopia. He argues that the most significant aspect of utopianism is its ‘translation into spatial practice’ (11) within the development of modernity. He finds inspiration for this idea through a reading of Louis Marin’s *Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces* (1984). As Hetherington explicitly equates some of Marin’s concepts with the notion of heterotopia, it is worth briefly looking at Marin’s multifaceted work in order to examine whether such equations can be justified. Marin provides a highly complex study of the textual play within Thomas More’s *Utopia*, published in 1516. He explores the semiotics of More’s text,
producing a theory of utopian practice or what Marin calls ‘utopics’. In particular, he deconstructs the endless play of ambiguities within the word ‘utopia’, combining ‘outopia’ (no place) and ‘eutopia’ (good place). Overall, he traces how the significance of More’s book published at the dawn of modernity imaginatively reveals an ambiguous gap between representations of a worn-out Europe and a newly discovered America. Utopia for Marin is the semantic play that reveals an interval that is neither one world nor another, a force of difference that outlines, often negatively, the possibility, in this instance, of a forthcoming era of modernity or capitalism. Based upon conceptual underpinning provided by his analysis of Kant, Husserl and Derrida (7-28), Marin treats utopia as a literary form that has the potential to display something utterly different from ordinary discourse. He interprets More’s *Utopia* on three levels: conceptually, as the historical presentation of various deep-seated contradictions; imaginatively, as a fictional ‘staging’ of these contradictions; and aesthetically, as multiple, incongruous spatial play. Marin’s work is therefore about the possibilities and limits of language.

Marin’s thought is often difficult and elusive, but a key point is that he wishes to grasp utopia in its process, not as a settled image, representation, system, totality or ideology. In a stimulating summary of Marin’s reading of More’s text, Jameson argues that utopia is an unsettling event or practice produced by the text’s presentation of irreconcilable contradictions (1988: 87). More’s text does not mediate between opposites or attempt reconciliation; it exposes the limits of our customary thinking and leaves us with the empty space of the ‘neutral’. Utopia here is not about representing an ideal society; it is a textual space that creatively provokes the possibility of a fundamental transformation of society. For example, through a teasing play of historical references and detailed descriptions of an imaginary community, More’s text not only displays contradictions within the feudal system but also anticipates potential contradictions within the economic and political organisation of capitalism. Contradictions emerge through a continuous tension between trying to pin down, to describe or encapsulate a place and at the same time presenting that place as unsettlingly different. For instance, the cartography of More’s utopia throws out many incongruities such as the impossibility of describing seating arrangements in the dining hall that encompass both the authority of the elders and the underlying principle of equality that is supposed to regulate the community (96-7).
Hetherington’s use of Marin is forced and unconvincing. Marin’s semiological study is reduced to a loose presentation of the ‘neutral’ and its equation with heterotopia:

The space of the neutral, therefore, is the space of an alternate ordering; it is the space I have called, after Foucault, heterotopia. (Hetherington, 1997: 67)

It is quite possible that the two concepts could be used together productively, but this would require a careful and sustained ‘reading’ of a specific site, applying at least some of Marin’s semantic tools which he has appropriated from Derrida. Such a study would have to conceptualise how the neutral can be both ‘an impossible space, a realm of différence as Derrida would have it’, or an empty space, and the encountered ‘realm of social ordering’ (67). At most the analysis would require recognition that these two notions of ‘heterotopia’ and the ‘neutral’ stem from very different intellectual pathways, highlighted by the colourful and acrimonious exchanges between Foucault and Derrida (see Boyne, 1990). A concept of the ‘neutral’ can be found in Foucault’s essay on Blanchot but this is very different from its use within deconstructivists’ accounts (Foucault, 1998b: 149). In general, Hetherington opens up a potentially fascinating linkage between Foucault and Marin’s concepts, but does not help his case through the bold assertion that they are ‘almost identical’ (1997: 69).

Hetherington’s misuse of Marin is compounded, I think, through another equation that he asserts between heterotopia, the neutral and ‘similitude’ (43). Taking his cue from Foucault’s essay on Magritte, This is Not a Pipe (1998c), Hetherington argues that these spaces work through similitude, or unusual and unsettling combinations and juxtapositions, rather than any sense of ‘resemblance’ or forms of representation. Although this does chime with Foucault’s literary account of heterotopia found in his preface to The Order of Things, it seems hard to connect the ‘monstrous combinations’ of the surrealists with Marin’s concept of the ‘neutral’. Put simply, the former defies classification and works laterally, whereas the latter is based on a rigorous dialectic. In a way, returning to a previous confusion in Hetherington’s text between ‘alternative’ and ‘alternate’, similitude is about various ‘alternative’ orderings, whereas the neutral is a negative ‘alternate’ ordering. One sparks off the imagination in baffling directions and affirms nothing (Foucault, 1998c: 202); the other affirms a contradiction and ‘a possible future reconciliation.... ’ (Marin, 1984: 8-9).
Hetherington wishes to pin down heterotopia to a particular role at a certain stage of history. Such an assertion goes against Foucault’s argument that these sites can be found in all cultures and that their function changes throughout history, but Hetherington does expose some interesting questions regarding how heterotopia might work relationally and also how these sites might have a particular importance within the emergence of modernity. Although his supporting arguments are weak, Hetherington’s conclusions are suggestive and worth exploring further. He outlines how these spaces have no intrinsic features; their distinction arises solely through their relation to other sites and they have ‘multiple and shifting meanings’. He also highlights the fact that many of Foucault’s examples gain a particular power and influence during the different stages of the modern era: asylums, prisons, cemeteries, botanical gardens, libraries, museums and so on.

**Soja and post-modernity/‘third’ space**

In contrast to Hetherington, Edward Soja links the notion of heterotopia with post-modernity rather than modernity. In a range of studies, Soja uses Foucault’s work generally, and the notion of heterotopia specifically, to open up and explore new approaches to the study of human geography (1989, 1995, 1996). Soja wishes to overturn what he describes as a ‘persistent residual historicism’ that distorts and blinkers much modern critical social theory (1989:16). He makes a case for spatialising social theory and argues that Foucault was ahead of the game in this project. Soja often justifies these innovative approaches by explicitly aligning Foucault and post-modernity. For example, this bold statement about Foucault is found towards the beginning of *Postmodern Geographies*:

> He would no doubt have resisted being called a postmodern geographer, but he was one, *malgre lui*, from *Madness and Civilisation* to his last works on *The History of Sexuality* (1989:16)

Without going into an insular, if not sterile, debate about what is or is not post-modern, it is worth noting Soja’s sweeping use of the term. What is missing in his work is any acknowledgement that the term ‘postmodern’ is, to use Jameson’s words, ‘not merely contested, it is also internally conflicted and contradictory’. Jameson argues that for better or worse ‘we cannot not use it’, but unlike Soja, he is extremely cautious:
Postmodernism is not something we can settle once and for all and then use with a clear conscience. The concept, if there is one, has to come at the end, and not at the beginning of our discussions about it. (1991:xxii)

Soja makes massive assumptions about, and all-encompassing appropriations of, both the notion of post-modernity and the work of Foucault. It is within this questionable context that he uses Foucault’s notion of heterotopia to underpin his arguments. Soja applies Foucault’s ideas about ‘different spaces’ in order to describe specific sites, for example, he analyses the Citadel-LA, the ‘urban fortresses found in the centre of Los Angeles and an exhibition held there in 1989 to celebrate the bicentennial of the French Revolution (1989 and 1996: 186). However, Soja’s main application springs from Foucault’s term ‘heterotopology’ to describe a method of ‘reading’ particular sites. This is built up into a whole new way of seeing and thinking about space, or the conception of ‘Thirdspace’ (1996: 145). Thirdspace, embraces a range of what he calls ‘radical postmodern perspectives’ and also includes an interpretation of Lefebvre’s work, particularly The Production of Space (1991), combined with Foucault’s concept of heterotopia. He claims that both ‘restructure the most familiar ways of thinking about space across all disciplines’ (Soja, 1996: 11). But is it useful not just to contrast but actually incorporate Foucault’s thumb-nail sketch within Lefebvre’s dense, elaborate, complex reflections on space? It is worth briefly looking at Lefebvre’s work before returning to Soja’s use of it.

Throughout his studies, Lefebvre recognises the full complexity and plurality of space: ‘how many maps, in the descriptive or geographical sense, might be needed to deal exhaustively with a given space, to code and decode all its meanings and contents?’ (1991: 85). He is also acutely aware that the practice of analysing space always contains the danger of missing or distorting its diversity and richness through some form of abstraction (93). Space develops like a spider’s web, a network of boundaries. It is more like a texture than text (117-118). Gestures, traces and marks start to produce space before any intellect gets involved. For Lefebvre, space originates from, and is an extension of, the body. He sought ways of capturing how social spaces interpenetrate like rhythms or ‘waves colliding and mingling’ (87), stressing the fundamental position of the senses, as opposed to mental constructions, language and the visual. The process of writing about social space makes ‘nature’ distant, displaced, ordered and abstract:
Knowledge falls into a trap when it makes representations of space the basis for the study of ‘life’, for in doing so it reduces lived experience. (230)

Complementing this far-reaching spatial phenomenology, Lefebvre uses Marx as a ‘point of departure’ (321). Lefebvre acknowledges that Marx recognised the importance of space, specifically land, towards the end of *Capital*, but Lefebvre wants to develop this theme, arguing that the ‘renewal of Marx’s concepts is best effected by taking full account of space’ (343). For Lefebvre, the whole of space is an object of productive consumption. All the earth’s resources are part of the forces of production and the whole urban fabric, including transport and communication networks, are part of the means of production. Lived experience is crushed by abstract space through practices of the state, the military and commerce. He traces the start of the ‘space of accumulation’ in the twelfth century in Western Europe (263), governing natural rhythms without becoming fully fledged abstract space. For Lefebvre the sixteenth century became the key turning point when, for example, the town overtook the country in economic influence and with its own rationality. At the same time, space was conceptualised differently. In the sixteenth century the accumulation process intensified and transformed space. Space is broken up, divided and localised and nature fades into the background. Capitalist space is characterised by fragmentation (segregation, division, separation) and homogenisation (coherence, conformity, uniformity). In a romantic and nostalgic vein, he considers that under conditions of modern industry and city life, abstraction dominates the relationship to the body (205). However, nothing disappears, earlier forms always underpin what follows (229) and there still exist ‘spaces for play, spaces for enjoyment, architectures of wisdom or pleasure’ (348).

Lefebvre uses what he calls a tripartite, dialectical approach (see Shields, 1999: 109-115). His crucial and most well known classification hinges on the following three interconnected elements:

Perceived space (*espace perçu*) or spatial practice (e.g. daily, routine reality, how space is used: production and reproduction)

Conceived space (*espace conçu*) or representations of space (e.g. knowledge, signs, the space of scientists, planners, technocrats: linked to ideology)
Deliberately criss-crossing, jumbling and reformulating all three modes of space in order to capture its richness and diversity, Lefebvre analyses the various developments towards ‘abstract’ space, a gradual formalisation or quantitative trend that ‘erases distinctions’ (1991: 49). But in contrast to these destructive trends, Lefebvre also articulates a strong utopian dimension within his reflections on the production of space, particularly towards the end of his major study. He asserts that to ‘change life ..... we must first change space’ (190). His analysis leads to the possibility of a different, new and potentially revolutionary space or at least the possibility of a ‘counter space’ (348-9 and see also Shields 1999: 58-60). He refers to spaces for contemplation and pleasure (Lefebvre: 1991: 379). ‘Leisure is as alienated and alienating as labour’, however, through the spaces of leisure new beginnings may be found, as a tension, contradiction, arises that is not necessarily passive, and which may lead, however faint, to an attempt to foster an explosive new space (383-5).

Acknowledging that Lefebvre went out of his way to avoid presenting a methodical theory of space, Soja nevertheless condenses and organises his thought systematically. He discusses Lefebvre’s critique of a double illusion: the ‘realistic illusion’ that concentrates narrowly upon natural, physical, objective, material or empirical space and ignores the space of the imagination and the ‘illusion of transparency’ that is fixated with mental, subjective, ideal, designed or cognitive space and ignores lived and social space (Soja, 1996: 61-63). Such a critique opens up the possibility of what Soja describes as a ‘trialectics of spatiality’ that explodes the binary illusion and combines the physical, mental and social, with each feature conceived as ‘simultaneously real and imagined, concrete and abstract, material and metaphorical’ (65). Soja then turns to Lefebvre’s spatial triad as indicted above: perceived space conceived space and lived space. He suggests that Lefebvre makes a political and strategic choice in implicitly privileging the last spatialisation. Lived social space is the ‘terrain for the generation of ’counterspaces’, spaces of resistance to the dominant order’ (68). For Soja this is a radical and open ‘Thirdspace’, both imaginative and real, and a space for ‘struggle, liberation, emancipation’ (68).

Soja also finds Thirdspace perspectives in Foucault’s notion of heterotopia and goes as far as to equate the concept with Lefebvre’s lived or representational space, building up a new, far-
reaching, ‘transdisciplinary’ approach. Soja’s conflation ‘heterotopology of thirddspace’ is in some ways surprising as he admits that Foucault’s lecture is ‘rough and patchy’ (154) as well as presenting ‘frustratingly incomplete, inconsistent, incoherent’ examples (162). How therefore can Soja build from this shaky ground such large and embracing concepts? One way is to marry the ideas to others, for example those of Lefebvre, the other significant manoeuvre is to equate the lecture on heterotopia with Foucault’s other work, especially with themes of knowledge and power:

In ‘Of Other Spaces’ is encapsulated the sites of Foucault’s unending engagement with spatiality, with a fundamentally spatial problematic of knowledge and power (Soja, 1996: 162)

This is significant because a few pages earlier Soja had addressed and rejected the idea of incorporating Foucault’s other work in his notion of Thirdspace and states that it would be a risky procedure as “Foucault rarely addressed the ‘spatial problematic’ directly and explicitly in his major writings (154). In turn, this does not sit comfortably with the extravagant claim that ‘hidden in the underbrush of the Thirdspace….is the body and mind of Michel Foucault’ (145). Soja seems in this sense to want it both ways. But by slipping in notions about ‘power and knowledge’ it enables him to make the large claim that Foucault is envisioning an alternative approach to space, one that challenges and resists all established conceptions. This procedure is also identified by Philo, who in making an even stronger case for aligning Foucault’s work with postmodern geography, nevertheless finds Soja incorporates ideas about power too easily and without attention to the detail of Foucault’s varied historical studies. He argues that Soja misleadingly attempts to create something fundamental and total with regards Foucault’s thought:

... by claiming to find the ‘essence’ of Foucault’s postmodern geography and by in effect hooking up his own version of Foucault’s geography to his own version of postmodernism, Soja ends up giving a misleading statement of Foucault’s distinctive position (Philo, 1992: 41)

Although Philo’s own linking of Foucault with postmodernism does not address adequately the contested nature of the term, the above criticism is important as he acknowledges that Soja is one of the few theoretically minded geographers who has had any sustained engagement with Foucault.
Soja’s interpretation of Foucault is disappointing for a variety of reasons. He places Foucault’s work within a spatial context by asserting that his historical studies were ‘proactively spatialised from the start’ (1989:18) and yet there is virtually no discussion or even detailed reference to these studies. In turning to Foucault’s lecture of heterotopia, much is made of his brief comments about privileging space over time, but the detail of the text is merely summarised and contains no analytical reflection. He occasionally hints at some underlying heterotopian properties such as a ‘relational’ quality (17) or an ability to be ‘combinatorial, microcosmic, concretely abstract’ (1995: 14), but these stimulating ideas are not developed. Such a fragile framework is then equated rather than contrasted with Lefebvre’s spatial preference, which in turn is reduced to a radical and open space for conflict, freedom, emancipation and ‘resistance to the dominant order’ (68). To marry Lefebvre’s far reaching spatial narrative, based upon a subtle reinterpretation of phenomenology and Marx, with Foucault’s overall work and specific notion of heterotopia requires more than acknowledgment of potential differences (Soja, 1996: 162); it requires a detailed examination of Foucault’s applications and studies of space.
References


Peter Johnson (Heterotopian Studies, 2012)