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GENDERED SPACES AND PRACTICES¹

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“A room of one’s own”

The concept of “space” in this chapter refers to literal and figurative sites where social roles and power dynamics are shaped. The dynamics of such spaces are complex, and their significance in higher education is perhaps best introduced by means of a story. In the 1940s, four women who would later go on to become great philosophers (and lifelong friends) met in Oxford, where they had just embarked upon their studies. These women were Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Elizabeth Anscombe. In the history of philosophy, such a cohort of prominent female philosophers, which today has started to gain recognition as a philosophical school, is rarely heard of. How was it possible? This was a question Jonathan Wolff asked in *The Guardian* in 2013. Wolff noted that they all came to Oxford at the outbreak of the Second World War, at a time when much of the male faculty and students had disappeared from campus to contribute to the war effort. The group, which is often dubbed The Wartime Quartet, pretty much had the university to themselves, along with the undivided attention of the remaining faculty. Wolff asked: What would the history of these thinkers look like had it not been for these unusual circumstances? Would they have succeeded in establishing themselves as philosophers had they arrived at an earlier or later moment in time?²

Wolff’s question was answered in an open letter Midgley published in the same newspaper two days later. Midgley’s conclusion is clear: if she and her friends were successful, this was indeed because there were fewer men about.³ This view is echoed in her autobiography. There, she writes that their absence had the effect that it made it easier for women to be heard in discussion: “Sheer loudness of voice has a lot to do with the difficulty, but there is also a temperamental difference about confidence—about the amount of work that one thinks is needed to make

one's opinion worth hearing".⁴ With most of the male student body absent, the members of the Quartet could take the floor and develop their own original ideas, challenging and often directly opposing the reigning philosophical views at the time.⁵

When I use this story as a backdrop for writing about gendered spaces and practices in higher education, it is because it illustrates the significance of having it. Briefly put, it shows how gendered spaces and practices in higher education affect opportunities. The concept of "space" refers both to the arrangement and materiality of space—the mere fact of having access to a room in which to work, as Virginia Woolf writes in *A Room of One's Own*—and to the social structures within shared spaces. Spaces can both affirm and offer resistance to gender hierarchies, and understanding how this happens can help subvert the power dynamics within them. In the following, I give a brief overview of some conceptualisations of space that can be useful for thinking about gendered spaces and practices in academia today. I also argue that academic spaces should become more inclusive and diverse, and that this is important not only for the individuals concerned, but also for the development of academic disciplines and institutions. Finally, I offer some suggestions for how this can be achieved.

Conceptualisations of space

In recent decades, the concept of space has been used to an increasing extent in different fields as a lens for understanding how environments, both physical and social, affect and shape power, historical development, and identity. This development has its origins in the "new cultural geography" which emerged in the 1980s and sought to investigate the relationship between space, identity, and culture. The "spatial turn", as it is often referred to, involved a shift from place as a static, geographical location, to the notion of dynamic, constructed, and contested spaces.⁶ One factor that explains this development is that globalisation, modern transportation, and information technology have changed the way we live in and perceive space.⁷ The world has both shrunk and expanded as new sites for interaction have been made possible. Accordingly, attention has turned to the social dynamics of space. This way of thinking about space was also informed by postmodernism and poststructuralism, which called attention to the fact that space is "never neutral but always discursively constructed, ideologically marked, and shaped by the dominant power structures and forms of knowledge", as Wrede writes.⁸ In other words, space is socially and culturally mediated. This understanding has come to inform a perspective on space as a site where issues of sexuality, race, class, and gender are created and negotiated.

Among the thinkers that have informed this understanding are Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, and Edward Soja. Lefebvre's contribution was to challenge the dominant approach to human geography, which distinguished between material and mappable things in space on the one hand, and our representations of those spaces on the other.⁹ This gives a limited understanding of the ways in which we

use and live in space, he argued. In addition to these two established modes of space, which he termed *spatial practice* and *representations of space* respectively,¹⁰ he introduced the notion of *representational spaces*, or the actual experience of living in space. Lefebvre writes that it is “lived through its associated images and symbols” and is a space that “the imagination seeks to change and appropriate”.¹¹

Some places are imbued with meaning: think, for instance, of the Twin Towers, Camino de Santiago, or Utøya, places that we recognise as significant beyond ourselves. Our relationships to such places depend on where we stand: a single-family home neighbourhood, for example, can be taken to represent order and safety by some, while others think of them as culturally rigid and exclusive.¹² However, whatever meanings they hold for the individual or a society, these can be challenged and changed, Lefebvre argues.

Foucault also argued that the traditional two-mode understanding of space was insufficient for understanding human life and societal development. The concept of space is an important theme in much of his work. Throughout his life, Foucault wrote extensively on urban planning and argued that space can serve governing functions. For example, he showed how madhouses, hospitals, and prisons work as exclusionary spaces and serve to construct notions of madness, illness, and penalty. In a later article, he introduced the concept of heterotopia and argued for the breaking down of spatial hierarchies. While utopias are unreal spaces that do not exist, heterotopias, for Foucault, are “places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted”.¹³ Cemeteries, asylums, ships, and gardens are some of the examples Foucault provides. These spaces affirm the difference that has created them in the first place—consider, for example, how retirement homes or political meetings are their own worlds, mirroring the structures of the outside, yet operating according to their own logic. Foucault’s argument is that society should strive to have many heterotopias, both in order to affirm and make room for difference, but also in order to escape authoritarianism and repression.

Soja follows suit on these reflections with his concept of *Thirdspace*, a term that he uses to refer to how we think about and refer to socially produced space.¹⁴ Like Lefebvre’s representational spaces, *Thirdspace* refers to lived space. Soja offers both feminist and postcolonial interpretations of this concept when arguing for the disruption and disordering of identity and binary categorisation. He writes that he wants to “open up our spatial imaginaries to ways of thinking and acting politically that respond to all binarisms, to any attempt to confine thought and political action to only two alternatives, by interjecting an-Other set of choices”.¹⁵ What Soja does is to offer a critical analysis of space that calls out the hierarchies and power structures that sustain oppressiveness and exploitation.¹⁶

The concept of space has also been important in feminist studies. For feminist scholars working in fields such as history, sociology, anthropology, and geography, space became a useful heuristic for examining how homes, workplaces, suburbs,

and cities are profoundly gendered.¹⁷ Feminist thinkers writing about the role of space have pointed out that our public spaces are regulated by powerful norms, that these norms are often implicit and taken for granted, and that this is precisely what gives them their force.¹⁸ Notable examples are geographers Doreen Massey and Gillian Rose. One of Massey's contributions is her extensive and various demonstrations of the imbrication of the political and the spatial. In Massey's view, space is the product of interrelations and interactions; it is fundamentally heterogeneous and multiple, and it is always under construction.¹⁹ Massey shows this through her examinations of the spatial division of labour, urban development, and industrial reorganisation, to give just a few examples. She also coined the term "power geometry" to point to the ways in which space is imbued with and is a product of relations of power.²⁰ Rose, on her end, argues that geography and the discourse on spatiality are fundamentally androcentric, leading to primacy being given to spaces that are perceived as men's spaces.²¹

Another thinker I would like to draw attention to is bell hooks, who writes about "living on the margins of space".²² Taking as her point of departure her own experience as an African-American growing up in a working class family in Kentucky, hooks writes about how she always had to push against the oppressive boundaries of her environment, whether they were white, male, or middle or upper class. "I am located at the margin", hooks writes.²³ We can find ourselves at the margin because oppressive structures push us there, but hooks' more important point is that the margin is also a site of resistance, creativity, and power, and may offer a location from which we can articulate and make sense of our being in the world.

Space can have contradictory significances for women. On the one hand, it can mean confinement and limitation. Female characters in fairy tales, for instance, are often confined to their respective homes and castles, which they try to escape in a quest for freedom. Cinderella and Rapunzel are two examples that come to mind, and we can make what we want of the fact that they escape their respective confinements only to find themselves by the end of the fairy tale in castles. Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Doris Lessing's *To Room Nineteen*, and Deborah Levy's *Real Estate* all make use of spatial metaphors to explore themes of female independence and autonomy. Such metaphors can signify barriers and obstacles—in the opening pages of *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf describes how she was refused entry into a library on account of being a woman²⁴—but as McDermott has pointed out, there are also many examples of writers who attempt to re-imagine space to push past these barriers.²⁵ There is, for example, a rich tradition of utopian fiction by women writers, such as Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground*,²⁶ or Gerd Brantenberg's *Egalia's Daughters*. In other words, spatiality is not only a key notion to understand our current situation, but also a helpful tool to re-imagine what we want our society to be like.

Safe spaces and inclusive spaces

Much has changed since the days of the Wartime Quartet. At that time, it was uncommon for universities to even grant degrees to women—the University of

Oxford started doing so in 1920. Today, women are no longer a minority at universities. Since the 1990s, female participation in higher education has increased so that the gender imbalance has been reversed, with women making up the majority of the student body.²⁷ However, there are large disparities between disciplines, and the fact that there are more women at universities does not mean that they have the same opportunities or face the same odds to get ahead. Many fields have what is commonly referred to as *leaky pipelines*—the women they attract in the first place tend to disappear the higher up the echelons of academia we look, choosing instead to pursue alternate career paths. While many fields may attract female rather than male students on an undergraduate level, the gender distribution tends to change after the graduate level.²⁸

More research is needed to understand the depth of the challenges women and other marginalised groups meet in academia. Here, I will merely make two suggestions for measures that can be implemented to counter the leaky pipeline: I argue for the importance of establishing women's groups and support networks, and I make some suggestions for how the spaces that are shared can become more inclusive. First, however, I want to say something about why this is important.

Inclusivity and diversity have effects beyond that of making sure that individuals who wish to pursue an academic career receive better chances to do so; it is also important for the development of the disciplines these individuals are a part of. The essay "Concrete Flowers: Contemplating the Profession of Philosophy" by Kristie Dotson offers a good account of why this is so. Dotson writes about how the dominant conceptions of what academic philosophy should be like and what topics it should engage with can marginalise the concerns and interests of people with questions that do not fit this agenda. Thinking that the established canon of thinkers, topics, and methods is representative for the entirety of the field when it only describes a small part of it means that we are privileging a set of epistemic assumptions and practices over others. Often, ideas that challenge canonical questions and methods are simply dismissed as not being academic at all.²⁹

We can find an example of this if we return to our Quartet and consider the philosophical reception of Murdoch specifically.³⁰ Contrary to the other members of the group, Murdoch eventually abandoned an academic philosophy career altogether. There might be several reasons for this—for one, she had already established herself as a successful writer of fiction and wanted to pursue this full-time. However, she increasingly felt herself to be at odds with the contemporary philosophical scene and came to doubt that what she was doing was "real philosophy". Murdoch's biographer Conradi writes that she was thought to be "'exotic' in the sense of unassimilated",³¹ not fitting the common conception of what a philosopher should do and be like.

Recent years have seen a shift in the attention to Murdoch's philosophy and an increasing recognition of her originality and insight. The lesson to be learned, however, is that if we do not make room for diverse voices, who can often challenge existing conceptions and raise new questions, we enforce the dominant positions and marginalise ideas that do not fit the disciplinary agenda. Not only

may we lose talented individuals; it can also cause our thinking to become stale and less relevant.

Recommendations

A remark on terminology is in order. There is an ongoing debate at universities across the world concerning “safe spaces”, and a hot topic is the claim that such spaces threaten free speech. I will not discuss that debate here, but merely note that one of the reasons why it is difficult to have productive conversations about safe spaces is that it is a term that has multiple definitions. Moira Kenney traces the origins of the concept back to gay bars in the mid-1960s. With the development of the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s, the term came to signify “not only a physical space but a space created by the coming together of women searching for community”.³² Today, however, the term has increasingly come to refer to how shared spaces can become more inclusive. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, for example, defines a safe space as “a place (as on a college campus) intended to be free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations”.³³ To make this distinction, I have opted to use the terms “support networks” and “inclusive spaces” to designate groups for marginalised people and communal spaces respectively.

Support networks

Calls for “women only” spaces are often met with hostility or astonishment at the fact that such spaces are still needed, Lewis et al. have noted.³⁴ However, testimonies from women who have participated in such groups attest to their importance. Writing about their own experience, Macoun and Miller argue that such groups succeed in supporting and enabling women and emerging feminist scholars in academia.³⁵ They create communities of “belonging and resistance, providing women with personal validation, information and material support, as well as intellectual and political resources to understand and resist our position within the often hostile spaces of the University”.³⁶

Such groups can take many forms: they can be organised within a department or institution, or they can have a national or international basis. To give a few examples—again from the field of philosophy—The University of Bergen, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, and The Norwegian University of Science and Technology all have their own networks for women in philosophy. Denmark has a national network for women and non-binary people in philosophy.³⁷ The Society for Women in Philosophy, which dates back to 1972, is an example of an international network, with branches in several countries, among them Sweden, the UK, Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands. A more intersectional group is Minorities and Philosophy (MAP), which aims to address and examine issues of minority participation in academic philosophy.³⁸ Such groups can serve important social functions in that they bring people who are underrepresented in their field together to discuss and share their experiences, but they can also serve more critical

functions, for instance through writing hearings on syllabuses and departmental policies, sharing job postings, and offering opportunities for informal mentoring. In addition to such formally established groups, unofficial reading groups and informal peer support networks can also be important for community-building and a valuable resource.³⁹ Online spaces can also be used to offer mentoring and collective support, as Bayfield et al. have shown.⁴⁰ The importance of online spaces was clearly demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to many people having to work from home.

What can be done at an institutional level is to initiate and facilitate the establishing of support networks, although their management should be left to the individuals who take part in them. Including such groups in departmental processes can contribute to democratising and legitimising them. While philosophy has served as an example above, support networks need not be discipline-specific, but can be cross-departmental and have a broader disciplinary focus, for instance in the STEM fields. Here, my concern has been fields where women are underrepresented, but they may be equally important for other marginalised groups, and may also serve important functions in groups where underrepresentation is not an issue.

Inclusive spaces

If we believe the issue is solved by establishing groups outside of the main space, we forget two things. First, even within women's groups, established social dynamics may not be inclusive to all those who are marginalised. The concerns of women of colour or non-binary people, for instance, may not be reflected in these groups. Second, if we focus on establishing groups outside of the main space, we implicitly concede that space as being a male space. It is therefore important to ensure that the spaces that are shared become more inclusive.

Measures that can be taken to achieve this include:

- More diverse readings on the syllabus.
- Diverse faculty in hiring and evaluation committees.
- Mentorship programmes for female early career researchers.
- Raising awareness about implicit bias.⁴¹
- Collectively deciding on norms for interaction and giving feedback during internal seminars, reading groups, and similar arenas.
- Acknowledging that each group has its own structure, culture, and history that will impact what is required to make shared spaces safe and inclusive.

Questions for discussion

- Can you find examples of practices in your own workplace or scientific community that contribute to making it an inclusive space?
- Can you find examples in your own workplace or scientific community that make it more difficult for you or others to participate?

- Does your workplace have a women-only group or similar networks, and if so, how does it impact the workplace?

Suggestions for further reading

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Notes

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- 2 Wolff 2013
- 3 Midgley 2013
- 4 Midgley 2007, 123
- 5 I write more about this in Winther 2021, 154–65
- 6 Beebe et al. 2012, 524
- 7 Wrede 2015, 11
- 8 Wrede 2015, 11
- 9 Borch 2002, 113
- 10 Borch 2002, 113
- 11 Lefebvre 1991, 39
- 12 Carp 2008, 135–6
- 13 Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 24
- 14 Borch 2002, 113
- 15 Soja 1996, 5
- 16 Wrede 2015, 12
- 17 Gunn 2001, 5
- 18 Gunn 2001, 8
- 19 Massey 2005, 9
- 20 Massey 2005
- 21 Wrede 2015, 13
- 22 hooks 2013, 80–5
- 23 hooks 2013, 23
- 24 Woolf 1929
- 25 McDermott 2005, 221
- 26 McDermott 2005, 221
- 27 Vincent-Lancrin 2008, 266
- 28 For updated figures in Europe, see European Commission 2021, 181
- 29 Dotson 2011, 406
- 30 For more on Murdoch as an example of Dotson’s argument, see Altorf 2020, 201–20 and Winther 2021
- 31 Conradi 2010, 552
- 32 Kenney 2001, 24

- 33 Merriam-Webster Dictionary n.d.
 34 Lewis et al. 2015, 1.1
 35 Macoun and Miller 2014, 287–301
 36 Macoun and Miller 2014
 37 NKNIF
 38 See also Losleben and Musubika, this volume
 39 Macoun and Miller 2014
 40 Bayfield et al. 2020, 415–35; see also Porrone and Poto, this volume
 41 See, for example, IMPLISITT (RCN 2020–2023/321031)

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