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**Dialectics and difference: against Harvey's dialectical  
'post-Marxism'.**

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**ABSTRACT**

*David Harvey's recent book, 'Geography, Justice and the Nature of Difference' (1996), engages with a central philosophical debate that continues to dominate human geography: the tension between the radical Marxist project of recent decades and the apparently disempowering relativism and 'play of difference' of postmodern thought. In his book, Harvey continues to argue for a revised 'post-Marxist' approach in human geography which remains based on Hegelian-Marxian principles of dialectical thought. This paper develops a critique of that stance, drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. I argue that dialectical thinking, as well as Harvey's version of 'post-Marxism', has been undermined by the wide-ranging 'post-' critique. I suggest that Harvey has failed to appreciate the full force of this critique and the implications it has for 'post-Marxist' ontology and epistemology. I argue that 'post-Marxism', along with much contemporary human geography, is constrained by an inflexible ontology which excessively prioritises space in the theory produced, and which implements inflexible concepts. Instead, using the insights of several 'post-' writers, I contend there is a need to develop an ontology of 'context' leading to the production of 'contextual theories'. Such theories utilise flexible concepts in a multi-layered understanding of ontology and epistemology. I compare how an approach which produces a 'contextual theory' might lead to more politically-empowering theory than 'post-Marxism' with reference to one of Harvey's case studies in JNGD.*

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Dialectics (whether in Plato or in Hegel) is the form of thinking that attempts to master the effects of difference in language by playing them off in a carefully ordered sequence of arguments that must - by all laws of dialectical reason - lead up to some ultimate truth. (Norris 1987: 56)

*différance* is the name we might give to the 'active' moving discord of different forces, and of differences of forces, that Nietzsche sets up against the entire system of metaphysical grammar, wherever this system governs culture, philosophy and science. (Derrida 1991: 70)

And we do not have to suppose that Marx was in agreement with himself. ("What is certain is that I am not a Marxist," he is supposed to have confided to Engels.) (Derrida 1994: 34)

Human geographers appear to be more than a little nervous of the idea of 'dialectics' and 'dialectical reasoning'. Dialectics is one of those words which frequently comes up in many theoretical and philosophical debates within human geography, but which I think rarely receives an adequate or consistent definition. Perhaps this is not surprising, however, when you consider the multiple traditions from which dialectical discussion has evolved (see Jay 1986). Dialectical thought has a long history within western philosophy reaching back to the work of Plato and Aristotle (cf. Evans 1977); it is firmly bound into the Enlightenment project, and indeed the whole western rationalist history of thought (Norris 1987; Bernstein 1991). Most dialecticians appear to concentrate on the works of Hegel (cf. Soll 1964; Kosok 1975; Rosen 1982) and Marx (cf. Marx [1975]; Ollman 1971; Adorno 1973; Coletti 1975; Arthur 1984; Bhaskar 1993) and amongst geographers, it is particularly the works of Marx which have received considerable attention (cf. Harvey 1982; 1985; Gregory 1994).

Dialectics is viewed by Harvey as the foundational philosophical underpinning of his work (Harvey 1996) and a key basis for developing the kind of politically-engaged theory which he thinks human geographers should produce. It is for this reason, that this paper focuses on dialectical thought and its utility (or otherwise) for human geographers.

The entry-point for my discussion is the conflict which has arisen within human geography as a consequence of the growing interest in postmodern theory<sup>1</sup>. 'Postmodern theory' is at best a loose term for a broad sweep of theoretical approaches (Norris 1993) whose common denominator is that they are informed by 'post-' philosophies, mostly dominated by work which has been described as 'poststructuralist'. In the last few years, human geography's 'postmodern' turn has fuelled a polarization of the subject at the sub-disciplinary level (cf. Sayer & Storper 1997; Bridge 1997). McDowell (1994) reflects a wider concern when she suggests that those writing within the new social and cultural geography feel they have little common epistemological ground with a continuing mainstream of economic geographers (see also Christopherson 1989). For example, in the 'gentrification debate' of the late 1980s and 1990s, the phenomena has been theorised by some using modernistic structural Marxist and neo-classical theories (Smith 1986; 1987; Smith *et al* 1994) whilst others have tackled the issue by focusing on the behaviour of individuals, consumptive acts and socio-cultural shifts more aligned with postmodern theorists (e.g. Warde 1991; Lyons 1996; McDowell 1997). A similar rift is identifiable in many aspects of the subject including debates on the activities of globalizing transnational corporations (cf. Dicken 1994; Amin & Thrift 1994; Castells 1996; Hirst & Thompson 1996; Thrift & Olds 1996) or the nature of gender relations in the workplace (cf. McDowell & Court 1994; McDowell 1997).

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms 'postmodern', 'poststructuralist' and the prefix 'post-' in the text to differentiate different groups of theory. However, this is not meant to suggest any form of sharp distinction between categories that often overlap. Postmodern theory, if such a thing exists, spans a range of contemporary theory within the social sciences. Post-structuralism is used to refer to a largely continental strand of philosophy although some have argued that no such movement existed in any coherent sense (cf. Lechte 1994). The prefix 'post-' attempts to represent the common threads which exist between various branches of poststructural thought and more recent postmodern theory.

In this context, David Harvey's latest book - '*Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*' (*JNGD*) (1996) - is of considerable interest. Marxist geographical thought has been a central theme of Harvey's career and he is one of the leading writers within what might be called the 'post-Marxist'<sup>2</sup> approaches. I think one of the central objectives of *JNGD* is to engage with the 'postmodern turn' and I would argue that it represents an attempt to bridge the growing rift between an increasingly postmodern human geography and Harvey's brand of 'post-Marxism'. And it is to dialectical thought to which Harvey turns in order to construct his bridges.

In *JNGD*, Harvey adopts what he terms 'a dialectical and relational approach' to a revised Marxist 'historical-geographical materialism'. In the late 1990s he reiterates his earlier view that dialectical-based thought is the best onto-epistemological<sup>3</sup> framework for other geographers (and social scientists) to follow. Harvey has long advocated and practised dialectical thought in his own work (Harvey 1973; 1982; 1989; 1995; 1996) but in *JNGD* he develops these arguments further; he attempts what appears to produce a synthesis of dialectical thought with the 'post-' critique (cf. Jameson 1989; Best & Kellner 1991; Barrett 1991; Lechte 1994) that has been levelled at Marxist and other approaches<sup>4</sup>, whilst simultaneously overcoming the hyper-relativist problems of postmodern thinking (cf. Callinicos 1989; Kariel 1989; Docherty 1990; Bauman 1993).

The postmodern conflict in human geography centres around two very different discourses<sup>5</sup>. On the one hand, the 'post-' critique of modernist theories such

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term 'post-Marxism' here as the most appropriate. I think it conveys the continued adherence by Harvey and others to many aspects of a Marxian epistemology whilst also emphasising that contemporary Marxian theory is very different from traditional modern Marxism.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term 'onto-epistemological' as an umbrella concept to encompass both the 'knowledge of what is' (ontology) and the grounds / method by which theories concerning what is become constructed (epistemology). The two terms are not clearly distinct although at different points in the subsequent discussion I will use only one to emphasise either the metaphysical or methodological aspects of knowledge frameworks.

<sup>4</sup> The principle criticisms arise from what Lyotard (1984) terms 'incredulity towards metanarratives' and a social constructivist view of theory and knowledge which is pervasive in a lot of 'post-' writing (see for example, the work of Foucault on power/ knowledge (e.g. Foucault 1980) and more recently Law (1992; 1994) / Latour (1993) on agency).

<sup>5</sup> I am not suggesting that there are simply two 'camps', one postmodern and another 'post-Marxist'. Indeed many human geographers may feel they occupy subject positions within both. However, in

as Marxism point to over-simplification and conceptual inadequacies - for example, the realisation that there is no singular capitalist system or that class is a narrow and in reality, problematic concept (Woodiwiss 1990; Graham 1992). On the other hand, reformulated Marxists, drawing on a widespread response from across the social sciences, respond with the argument that postmodern theories - which view knowledge as partial, constructed and imbued with power relations - leave no solid onto-epistemological ground basis around which to construct political projects and actions (see also Hoy 1986; Habermas 1987; Rorty 1991; Kellner 1991; McNay 1994; Wood 1990; 1992). In a 'post-' framework where there are only 'relative' not 'absolute' truths (cf. Young 1990a 1990b; Bauman 1993; Squires 1993), virtually any political position can be argued to be as equally justifiable as the next.

JNGD represents a clear continuation of the call by Harvey to appreciate the apparent futility of many postmodern theories.<sup>6</sup> He argues that while we should not ignore many insights from 'post-' theory, ultimately geographers should still be concerned with the 'real' issues which affect people's lives: social justice, exclusion, inequitable power relationships. To do this, Harvey is still arguing that a revised version of his geographical-historical materialism, founded around a dialectical approach, is the best way to go about this project.

The purpose of this paper is to argue that Harvey's analysis is inadequate. In criticising the broad sweep of postmodern theory, I would suggest he deals in generalized caricatures which fail to sufficiently respond to the 'post-' critique of his own position. JNGD only engages with postmodern thinking at a relatively superficial level, and it does not appreciate the onto-epistemological ramifications for Harvey's dialectical 'post-Marxism'. The problematic of postmodern relativism does indeed present difficult questions concerning how to produce politically-engaged

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characterising the differences between 'postmodern' and 'post-Marxist', I aim to identify some of the core differences between these discursive frameworks.

<sup>6</sup>JNGD thus represents a further instalment in a now substantial debate between reformulated Marxist frameworks and those who argue that it has been undermined by postmodern thought. For example: Geras 1987, Callinicos 1989, Peet 1992, Graham 1992 and Sayer 1993.



postmodern theory, but it does not diminish the force of the critique levelled at modernist epistemologies such as Marxism.

The central criticism I make of Harvey's proposed dialectical 'post-Marxism' originates from the work of several poststructural philosophers: Derrida, Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari. My contention is that Harvey's 'post-Marxism' clings unquestioningly to well-established, inflexible concepts, which are 'rubbed against each other' within a dialectical epistemology. The concepts used - capitalism or class, for example - have been widely criticised for their simplistic 'black box' nature (see Docherty 1990; White 1991; Cahoon 1996). Critiques of the multiple nature of capitalisms (cf. Albert 1993; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars 1994), or the difficulty in defining a singular class (Woodiwiss 1990; Simons & Billig 1994), or even defining other traditional concepts such as gender (e.g. Butler 1990; 1993; Shildrick 1997), are now common. I develop an argument from a re-reading of these poststructuralists that producing new dialectical combinations of 'old' concepts, as Harvey does, does nothing to overcome these problems. Furthermore, I suggest that 'post-Marxist' geographical theory is further restricted by its spatial ontology which imposes limitations by prioritising the spatial in its conception of social life.

However, my critique is not meant to be unnecessarily 'anti-Marxist'. There is a multitude of Marx-informed thought, and there remains much within JNGD with which I agree. Nevertheless, I think there is an urgent need to escape the constraints of Harvey's type of 'post-Marxist' human geography. The obvious question though, is 'what alternative?' Therefore, in the latter part of the paper, I develop my poststructural reading to argue for an approach to ontology and epistemology which is much more flexible, both in the way it seeks to theorise the 'context' of social life and in the way in which concepts are produced. Such an approach leads to the production of *contextual theories*<sup>7</sup> which I suggest present a far more radical basis for developing politically-engaged and productive theory than 'post-Marxism'.

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<sup>7</sup> I will argue that contextual theories share common epistemological ground with other recent frameworks drawing on 'post-' thought: actor-network approaches, non-representational theory (cf. Thrift 1996) and 'local' theory (cf. Bridge 1997; Smith 1997).

## **2 HARVEY AND THE PRINCIPLES OF DIALECTICS**

Harvey (1996) draws primarily on Marx in his synthesis of the principles of dialectics, although he suggests he draws 'also from those who have in recent years been drawn to reflect on what dialectics might mean' (ibid.: 49). In particular, he makes extensive use of Bertell Ollman's (1973; 1990; 1993) account of dialectical thinking and he is greatly influenced by recent work within the philosophy of science (cf. Bohm 1980; Bohm & Peat 1989; Levins & Lewonthin 1985). In JNGD, Harvey identifies eleven broad principles behind dialectical thinking as he sees it. I do not want to replicate here this eleven-fold division, as it seems a rather arbitrary partition of ideas which are not necessarily separate from one another. I prefer to offer a brief review of the key tenets of Harvey's principles which I suggest revolves around four main areas: process and relations; the nature of 'things' and 'systems'; the nature of time and space and creativity and change.

With regard to the first theme, process and relations, Harvey suggests that dialectical thinking 'emphasises the understanding of processes, flows, fluxes, and relations over the analysis of elements, things, structures and organized systems' (ibid.: 49). Thus, at an ontological level, dialectical thought suggests that 'elements, things, structures and systems do not exist outside of or prior to the processes, flows, and relations that create, sustain or undermine them.' (ibid. : 49). In this sense, Harvey sees dialectical thought as overcoming the problems of a static conception of things, elements or "permanencies", as he later calls them. 'Things are constituted out of flows, processes, and relations operating within bounded fields which constitute structured systems or wholes' (ibid.: 50). Therefore, dialectical thinking forces us to question *by what process* was every "thing" or "permanency" we encounter constituted. Further, he argues that 'dialectical enquiry is itself a process that produces permanencies such as concepts, abstractions, theories and institutionalized structures

of knowledge which stand to be supported or undermined by continuing processes of enquiry' (ibid.: 55).

Consequently, the second main (and related) theme in Harvey's formulation of the principles of dialectics is a development of this understanding of 'things' and 'systems'. He argues that 'things' and 'systems', which in positivist and empiricist traditions of research have been treated by many as irreducible and therefore unproblematic, 'are seen in dialectical thought as internally contradictory by virtue of the multiple processes that constitute them' (ibid.: 51). Thus, for example, individual sociality is built up through the capturing of certain powers which reside in social processes (ibid.). These powers are continuously reconstituted - the retention of mental capacity or symbolic skills, for example - in a perpetual process through life. Some of these processes will act in contradiction and be inconsistent with others. Thus, 'things' are always assumed 'to be internally heterogeneous at every level' (Levins & Lewonthin 1985: 272 *cited in* Harvey 1996). This has a number of implications.

Firstly, any 'thing' can be decomposed at an epistemological level into a collection of other 'things' which are in some relation to each other. There is no 'basement' in this line of argument: the contention being that experience has so far shown that "all previously proposed undecomposable 'basic units' have so far turned out to be undecomposable, and the decomposition has opened up new domains for investigation and practice" (Levins & Lewonthin 1985: 278 *cited in* Harvey 1996). Harvey terms this 'the dialectics of deconstruction', in that all categories are capable of dissolution. However, Harvey's conception of deconstruction here is far removed from Derrida's use of the term which seeks to 'call into question the basic ideas and beliefs that legitimise current forms of knowledge' (Norris 1987: 14) - Derridean deconstruction might well question the very concept 'thing' itself which Harvey's approach would never do. I will return to this issue later.

Secondly, since all 'things' are internally heterogeneous, then the only way we can understand the qualitative and quantitative attributes of things is by understanding

the processes and relations they internalise. This notion of *internal relations* is drawn primarily from Ollman (1990) but also from recent writing within an ecological literature (cf. Eckersley 1990; Naess 1989) which Harvey sees as framing a similar view (Harvey 1995). The key idea is that an individual 'cannot be understood except by way of the metabolic, social and other process which are internalized' (ibid.: 7). Thus, things are better conceived as 'events' (after Whitehead 1985) to emphasise their dynamism. The implication is that there can be 'no limit to this argument': there is no boundary to the systems of relations internalized<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, the act of 'setting boundaries with respect to space, time, scale and environment then becomes a major strategic consideration in the development of concepts, abstractions and theories' (ibid.: 53).

The third theme is the theorisation of time and space in dialectical thought. Harvey suggests that 'space and time are neither absolute nor external to processes but are contingent and contained within them' (ibid.: 53). Thus, 'there are multiple spaces and times (and space-times) implicated in different physical, biological and social processes.' (ibid.: 53). The ideas of Lefebvre (1991) are used to suggest that social processes *produce* [original emphasis] their own forms of time and space; that is to say that 'processes actively construct time and space' (ibid.: 53).

Fourthly, Harvey suggests that dialectical thinking is characterised by 'transformative behaviour' or "creativity", arising 'out of the contradictions which attach both to the internalized heterogeneity of "things" and out of the more obvious heterogeneity present within systems' (ibid.: 54). Creative tensions are shaped in the oppositions which arise as parts and wholes confront each other: this is Hegelian 'becoming' where creativity (or difference) arises out of the opposition between being and not-being (cf. Hegel 1967 [1821]). Harvey emphasises a key point which is seen as 'perhaps the most important of dialectical principles' (ibid.: 54): that 'change is characteristic of all systems and all aspects of systems' (Levins & Lewonthin 1985:

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<sup>8</sup>In my view the word 'internalise' here is an inadequate term for what Harvey is attempting to convey. There can be no clear inside to a system without *a priori* boundaries.

275 cited in Harvey 1996); hence, 'change and instability are the norm and the appearance of stability of "things" or systems is what has to be explained. (ibid.: 55). For Harvey, this is where dialectical thought provides the greatest scope for the construction and / or exploration of different 'possible worlds'; it is here that there is the potential for the construction of new knowledges, new political identities and to engender social change. Of course, this necessarily means that dialectical thought includes the building of 'ethical, moral and political choices (*values*) into its own process' (ibid.: 56).

In sum, in JNGD Harvey re-iterates and develops his career-long proposition that dialectical thought, in conjunction with his Marxian geographical-historical materialism, represents a useful basis for theory construction. In the next section, I will consider how Harvey attempts to reach a synthesis between this type of dialectical materialism and the 'post-' critique in arguing, as he does, that 'post-Marxism' is the best approach to radical theory construction for human geographers.

### **3 WHY PERSIST WITH A DIALECTICAL GEOGRAPHICAL-HISTORICAL MATERIALISM?**

to take inspiration from a certain spirit of Marxism... is heir to the spirit of Enlightenment which must not be renounced. We would distinguish this spirit from other spirits of Marxism, those that rivet it to the body of Marxist doctrine, to its supposed systematic, metaphysical, or ontological totality (notably to its "dialectical method"), to its fundamental concepts of labour, mode of production, social class...(Derrida 1994: 88)

For Harvey, dialectical thought still represents a bedrock for the application of a historical-geographical materialism: a framework which he has advocated in some form since *Social Justice and the City* (1973). In JNGD, it is clear that Harvey retains this line of thought from his earlier work. In the 1990s, he argues that dialectical

thought is the best way to escape the postmodern 'crisis of theory' (cf. Gregory *et al* 1994). However, the type of theoretical Marxian framework which Harvey develops in the 1990s has changed considerably from the days of *Social Justice*. Like most writing still within a Marxist epistemology (e.g. Lipietz 1988; Ruccio 1992; Resnick & Wolff 1987; 1997), Harvey has confronted the last decade's substantial critique of more traditional forms of Marxism. The revised Marxian epistemology which he develops in JNGD attempts to acknowledge and respond to many of the trenchant criticisms of the earlier Marxist project. It does this, I would argue, in a two principle ways.

First, in JNGD Harvey develops an epistemological framework for contemporary dialectical materialism which is veering towards anti-essentialism. In so doing Harvey appears to be taking fully on board the strong criticisms levelled at Marxism (and other modernist epistemologies) by 'post-' theory. Over the last decade geographers and other social scientists have absorbed the arguments of 'post-' writers such as Derrida and Foucault (philosophical debates which have their heritage in Nietzsche and Heidegger), that our conceptions of the world do not correspond to the truth, but at best correspond to a partial representation, a partial truth (Foucault 1984; 1993 [1980])). Modernist epistemologies have thus been regarded with increasing scepticism as to the validity of their 'grand narratives' (Lyotard 1984; Heller 1990; Smart 1992). Modern Marxism, for example, becomes one of many possible discursive approaches to theorizing contemporary society, and it no more corresponds to an absolute truth than any other discursive framework (Bauman 1993). Similarly, the concepts which Marx developed in *Capital* can no longer be regarded as some form of universal truth, but are reduced to partial representations within a certain discourse. There is no essential basis to class identity, for example; it is not a pre-given, cast in iron.

Various Marxian writers have responded to this by developing what could be described as an 'anti-essentialist' Marxism (cf. Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Resnick & Wolff 1987; 1989). In JNGD, Harvey implements a similar strategy by criticising the

anti-foundationalism of postmodern theory. He criticises the extreme 'post-' argument, which regards any form of essentialist or foundationalist position as untenable, for slipping into a politically-vacuous relativism. 'Post' thought can only ever be marginal to politically-engaged theory because it is caught up in 'fleeing from the noisy, chaotic controversy of the contemporary scene' (Meyer 1952: 9), pre-occupied with 'an isolated self' that 'severs any connection between freedom and political commitment.' (Harvey 1996: 72).

Harvey argues that 'the task of critical analysis is not, surely, to prove the implausibility of foundational beliefs (or truths), but to find a more plausible and adequate basis for the foundational beliefs that make interpretation and political action meaningful, creative and possible' (ibid.: 2). In this sense, Harvey's position is seeking to shift dialectical materialism away altogether from modernist concepts of as something fixed and stable. Rather, he re-emphasises the long-standing dialectical understanding of concepts being relational in their constitution (ibid.) – thus, for example, class identity is seen as a fluid, relational effect emerging from the operation of capitalist processes.

This brings me to the second major way in which JNGD moves towards incorporating 'post' theory: constructivism. Again philosophers such as Foucault (cf. Foucault 1979; 1980; 1981) and Derrida (cf. 1976; 1978a; 1981b), amongst others, have pointed to the all-encompassing nature of language or discourse<sup>9</sup>. At one level, a discourse or language can be viewed as a knowledge system which is internally consistent in itself; it is very hard (or even impossible) to think 'outside' discourse because language frameworks are all-inclusive (cf. Simons 1995). This is perhaps the core of what Derrida was getting at when he famously said 'there is nothing outside the text' (Derrida 1976: 158): in effect, if 'text' is taken to be similar to Foucault's notion of discourse, then there can be no exterior knowledge-position to take. To think absolute difference is impossible (cf. Foucault 1979; 1981).

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<sup>9</sup>For my purposes here the two terms are interchangeable.

Harvey appears to have incorporated these insights into his reconsidered dialectical materialism whilst still retaining the political argument for the need to produce ‘meta-theory’. To use his words, he ‘accept[s] that process, flux, and flow should be given a certain ontological priority in the world’ (ibid.: 7) but argues that that is precisely the reason why we should pay so much more careful attention to... “permanencies” (ibid.: 8).’ Permanencies are constructed entities in this framework; they are all the ‘things, institutions, discourses, and even states of mind of such relative permanence and power that it would be foolish not to acknowledge those evident qualities’ (ibid.: 8). Here, I think Harvey is reconceptualising his Marxian epistemology in a way that allows him to acknowledge that all truths are necessarily partial, that Marxist concepts such as class, or the institutions of late capitalism, are constructed entities, produced in everyday social action and at the conceptual level through the relational interaction of concepts within a certain discursive frame. It is in this sense that he sees dialectical thought, with its emphasis on processes and relations, as a powerful basis to construct ‘meta-theory’ which will form the basis for politically-engaged and empowering projects.

Of course, Harvey is not alone in developing an anti-essentialist Marxist stance. On the contrary, such a position, although perhaps more explicitly developed in an argument for dialectical thinking by Harvey, might be considered by many human geographers as being more or less akin to their theoretical stance. In short, the idea that there is some validity and force to ‘post-’ theory, but that in order to engage in the ‘real world’, we need to still deal in the ‘permanencies’ of daily political. Indeed, a considerable literature attempts to develop this type of ‘post-Marxism’ (cf. Lipietz 1993; Diskin & Sandler 1993; Fraad *et al* 1994; Cameron 1995; Laclau 1995; Mouffe 1995; Gibson-Graham 1996) and move a heavily-qualified geographical-historical materialism forward in some direction.

I think that this is an unacceptable, and ultimately unproductive, stance to take. My focus is Harvey’s dialectical brand of ‘post-Marxism’ but much of my critique holds relevance for a wider ‘post-Marxist’ literature. The starting point for



my opposition to Harvey's approach is, rather paradoxically, a point of strong agreement with one of Harvey's central arguments in JNGD: he complains about 'the proliferation of postmodern and poststructuralist ways of thinking and writing [which] makes it particularly hard these days to find anything as mundane as a common language for expression' (ibid.: 14). To me, this is a crucial point which few contemporary writers make in these 'postmodern times'. As Harvey suggest, 'meta-theory' and 'a common theoretical language' seem to be uncomfortably close to discredited modernist thought. However, if we are to escape postmodern relativism, then I agree with Harvey that there is a need to seriously consider how we might go about constructing 'permanencies' which can form the basis of politically-engaged action and theory. Where I do not agree is that a reformulated dialectical materialism - within a 'post-Marxist' epistemology - is a productive or feasible way in which to do this. However, before I come to expand this argument any further, it is necessary to first explore why Harvey places such faith in dialectical thought.

*Hamlet: a 'post-Marxist' synthesis of geographical-historical materialism and the 'post' critique?*

In chapter twelve of JNGD, Harvey considers the case of a fire in a chicken-processing plant in Hamlet, North Carolina in 1991, using it to explain how his dialectical approach produces politically-engaged theory. The wider implication from this discussion is the continuing class exploitation and lack of social justice available to many people in the contemporary global capitalist economy. Harvey argues that it was 'raw class politics of an exploitative sort which created a situation in which an accident could have the effects it did' (ibid.: 338). He suggests that the key process which led to the accident was the changing nature, and specifically, the decline of class-based politics in the United States; this left little support for any resistance to the Reaganite political environment of the 1980s and consequently worker rights were eroded in favour of capital.

In the US chicken-processing industry, he argues this process resulted in appalling safety provisions for the low-paid, mainly female, employees. The fire in Hamlet occurred in a factory where many died while struggling to escape from locked fire doors - the plant had never had a safety inspection in its eleven year history. Harvey argues that identity politics, drawing on postmodern theory, must shoulder some of the blame for this lack of political power: the weakening of US working class politics led to the 'increasing fragmentation of "progressive" politics around special issues: for example, the rise of the so-called new social movements (NSMs) focusing on gender, race, ethnicity, ecology, sexuality, multiculturalism, community and the like' (ibid.: 341). For Harvey, this typifies the postmodernist 'death of justice': scepticism of 'universal truths' has 'render[ed] any application of the concept of social justice as problematic' (ibid.: 342). He argues that the effect of deconstruction and postmodern criticism has been to 'reveal how *all* discourses about social justice hide power relations' in a way that produces 'a rather simple bipolar world: deconstructionists... who struggle for justice, and traditional ethical and political theorists who are the ideologues of unjust orders' (ibid.: 343). Any concentration on class alone would, in this view, be seen to hide, marginalize, disempower, and perhaps even oppress all kinds of "others", 'precisely because it does not acknowledge explicitly the existence of heterogeneities and differences based on race, culture etc. (ibid.: 345)<sup>10</sup>.

The answer to this postmodern trap is his 'post-Marxist' materialism - a dialectical approach sensitive to the 'post' critique. In the Hamlet case, Harvey implements Young's (1990a; 1990b) development of a family 'of concepts and conditions' relevant to a contemporary conception of social justice. Young's theorisation is of a multi-dimensional conception of social justice which functions around 'five faces of oppression': *exploitation, marginalization, powerless, cultural*

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<sup>10</sup>See Young's (1998) review of JNGD in which she argues that Harvey is misplaced in these arguments about the 'disempowering' aspects of gender and race-based political struggles.

*imperialism and violence*'. Young's work presents for Harvey a suitable non-essential 'meta-theory' of social justice which is compatible with his dialectical approach.

His prescription in the Hamlet case rests on four themes concerning the need to resurrect some general principles of social justice. First, Harvey identifies a need to 'break out of the local' by utilising Young's theorisation of the multidimensional forms of oppression. This provides scope to 're-insert universality dialectically in relation to particularity, positionality and group difference' (ibid.: 350). Second, he argues that a deconstructionist demand to dissolve rather than respect 'any cultural or social categories upon which respect might be bestowed (even for a time), is just as damaging as assuming a historical geography of cultural achievement that is set in stone' (ibid.: 352); this can only lead to an inevitable failure to 'understand how places and cultures are constructed, sustained and dissolved' (ibid.: 352) in such a way that the 'fundamental dialectical question of how processes and cultural entities relate in place is averted. Instead, Harvey thinks a movement towards Habermas' ideal of 'a process-based understanding of how norms and values of justice might better become universalized' would be appropriate (cf. Habermas 1987), without fully adhering to Habermas' 'outspoken critique of postmodern particularisms'. Finally, with regard to the postmodern view of situated knowledge and identity, Harvey sees the problem with 'post-' thinking as being an oscillation between two forms of thought on situatedness. One wing of 'post-' thought occupies a vulgar conception of situatedness which 'dwells almost entirely on the relevance of individual biographies' (ibid.: 354); this leaves it unable to 'engage with the dominant lines of political-economic power at work under capitalism' (ibid.: 357). Another wing of 'post-' thought, however, 'reduces everything to undifferentiated multiplicities and infinite flows' (ibid.: 356); this also encounters difficulties because 'the capacity for directed action becomes blocked by sheer confusion of identities' (ibid.: 357).

In this way, Hamlet is used in JNGD as an example of how 'post-' theory is compatible with Harvey's dialectical materialism. The 'postmodern trap' is avoided because Harvey reintroduces an epistemology that allows us to 'tell the difference

between significant and non-significant others'. Thus, 'universality must be construed in a dialectical relation with particularity: progressive politics will therefore relate the universal and the particular at different scales in the drive to define social justice from the standpoint of the oppressed' (ibid.: 362). It is the principles of dialectics that provide the key creative energy to this framework, and it precisely those principles, which I argue, are highly problematic.

*The need to move beyond dialectical materialism*

According to Harvey, the strength of dialectical materialism is that it produces 'creative insights' from the production of dialectical differences: he quotes Marx in suggesting that the best way to create new ways of thinking, to think differently, 'is to rub together conceptual blocks in such a way that they catch fire' (Harvey 1996: 76). However, I would argue that 'post-' theory presents far more fundamental and powerful criticisms of dialectical thought, and as a consequence also 'post-Marxism', than Harvey's analysis accounts for.

In his recent work responding to the 'crisis of Marxism' in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Derrida makes some important points about how we should understand Marx and the Marxist legacy. The central argument I wish to draw from this work is expressed in the quotation at the beginning of this section: that Marx, Marxism and Marxist concepts represent a multitude of legacies and strands of thought. Derrida argues, rather poetically, that it is almost ridiculous to dismiss 'Marxism' as a whole and that there are countless ways in which it remains relevant. However, whilst we might want to retain the 'spirit of Marx' in many ways, especially in for example the urgency for radical theory, we should not think this means that Marxist doctrines, including dialectical thought, are also part and parcel of that.

In fact, I think certain 'post-' theorists enable a critique of dialectical thought that undermines any form of 'post-Marxism'. There are two intertwined reasons for this. The first relates to a wider point about dialectical thinking itself. The principles

of dialectics rest on the assumption that productive thought and theory emerges from the interaction between two categories or concepts in some form of binarily-opposed relationship. I think this is a problematic and unnecessary assumption. A number of writers within the 'post-' realm of philosophy and social science have grappled with and problematised the issue of binary opposition (see especially Law 1992; 1994; Latour 1993; 1996; Serres 1982; 1995; Serres & Latour 1995). The crux of the issue is that there is no necessary reason why a dialectical relationship between two concepts 'rubbed together' is the best way to approach ontology / epistemology; indeed, the evidence from theorists such as Young (and see Bernstein 1983; Bhabha 1990; Yeatman 1994; Grosz 1994; Goodman & Fisher 1995; Strathern 1996) who are grappling with the need to construct theories of political reality, seems to be that what is needed is an approach that in some way considers the multiplicity of factors involved in social life more effectively. I will return to this point shortly.

However, secondly, I would also argue that the *concepts*<sup>11</sup> in circulation within Harvey's dialectical materialism are inadequate and potentially disempowering. In 'postmodernizing' his Marxist approach, Harvey is still implementing familiar concepts - 'class', 'capital' and 'labour', for example - which have a long history within Marxist (dialectical) thought. 'Post-Marxism' seems to involve a dialectical engagement of these 'old' concepts with a selection of 'new' concepts drawn from more recent social theory and 'post-' thought: for example, in Harvey's adoption of 'situatedness' (cf. Hartstock 1987; Haraway 1990; Taylor 1994) and Young's theorisation of social justice. The problem is that neither the older Marxist concepts nor the new postmodern ones are the subject of any form of onto-epistemological scrutiny; they are taken as 'pre-given'. Harvey adopts them in an unquestioning fashion, suggesting all that is needed to produce creative and politically-engaged theory-practice is to 'rub' combinations together in a dialectical fashion.

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<sup>11</sup>Regarding the notion of the 'concept', I take this to refer to the basic constructions of philosophical thought, from which theory can be constructed (cf. Deleuze & Guattari 1994)

I think this is dangerous. Harvey argues for the re-insertion of some notion of universality amongst this eclectic array of concepts. He argues this will lead to a 'united politics' - a politics to resist the processes of exploitation bound into the impoverished and unjust working conditions in the Hamlet chicken factory. But such an argument fails to question whether there is any feasible basis for constructing a political project around, in this case, class. Harvey has argued that US 'identity politics' in the last twenty years has emasculated class politics, but he ignores the issue of whether this was because class has become a problematic concept. My point is not whether class is or is not still useful, but that Harvey's onto-epistemology assumes far too much. It assumes that there is a coherent basis for 'working class' politics; it assumes that this concept can be epistemologically distinguished from the newer 'post-' issues of 'gender' and 'race'. The whole point behind much of these 'identity politics' is that people have multiple forms of identity which position them differently (see, for example, Hall 1990; 1992; Gergen 1991; Chambers & Curti 1996; Bhabha 1993). In fact, I think the Hamlet case is just another example of this difficulty: uniting people around class is difficult because there is no clear class identity. 'The dialectical re-insertion of class' as a concept does nothing to alleviate this; it may be impossible to get people to unite around 'class' in Hamlet for numerous reasons bound into their multiple conception of identity which the 'post-' literature considers at length<sup>12</sup>.

The same problem exists for all of the concepts that Harvey employs. When Harvey talks of 'capitalism', what exactly is he referring to? There is an enormous literature pointing to the multiple and diverse nature of the 'thing' which is described as 'capitalism' singular (cf. Reich 1991; Thurow 1992; Albert 1993; Hutton 1995; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars 1994). The nature and form of capitalism(s) in Hamlet, as elsewhere, needs much greater scrutiny and Harvey's approach cannot do that. What is needed, I think, is a form of theory that tackles the multiplicity of

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<sup>12</sup>Concerning the multiple and fluid nature of identity see, for examples, hooks (1990), Bhabha (1993) and Spivak (1987) on postcolonial identities and Kristeva (1987), Butler (1990), Irigaray (1985a; 1985b) and Probyn (1993) on gender.

concepts which 'post-' theorists tell us we need to understand social life, but which does something more than point to the infinite array of possible concepts which might be used, depending on your positionality. I am all for politically-engaged theory and, of course, there is utility in aspects of Harvey's concepts. I just think that as they stand, Harvey's concepts, as well as the dialectical way in which he implements them, are inadequate. Some 'post-Marxist' writing does tackle the issue of how concepts might be better produced (e.g. Kaplan & Sprinker 1993; Gibson-Graham 1996), but I think to find a better answer to this conundrum, there is a need for a closer reading of poststructural philosophy.

#### **4 THINKING DIFFERENTLY: BEYOND DIALECTICS AND BINARIES**

The key question which must now be addressed is: if Harvey's dialectical use of established concepts is inadequate, then how can new creative, and politically-empowering concepts be created? In this section I want to focus on the writings of two 'poststructural' philosophers to examine how it is possible to answer this question and produce new concepts for theory construction.

To break out of the restriction imposed by old concepts and a dialectical approach, we need to think creatively - I am referring to the idea of producing new ways of thinking which are in some way non-discursive in a Foucaultian sense. Within poststructural philosophy, there has been a considerable and prolonged debate around this issue (see Derrida 1978b; Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982; Arac 1988; Diamond & Quinby 1988; Boyne 1990; Still & Velody 1992; McNay 1992; 1994.). A number of thinkers including Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari have engaged with the philosophical question of what it is to 'think difference': that is what difference actually is, how it might be theorised, and how different concepts might be produced.

*Derrida, différance and the critique of dialectic*

Derrida's thought undermines Harvey's position because it calls into question the validity of dialectical thinking.<sup>13</sup> Harvey's dialectics draw their inspiration from a number of writers in the western tradition: primarily Marx (who was heavily influenced by Hegel<sup>14</sup>) and more recent writing within the physical sciences. Derrida's critique of this tradition focuses on the Hegelian dialectical approach, but it has comparable force when applied to Harvey's Marxist-based approach. For Hegel, the history of philosophy is narrated from the viewpoint of Absolute Reason: of a consciousness that can now look back and retrace the progress of its own triumphal evolution (Hegel [1977]). This progress is marked by an increasing power of self-reflexive understanding, so that Reason finally arrives at a point where its entire past history becomes ideally intelligible in the light of present knowledge. In this sense, Hegelian dialectics claim to speak the truth of history as well as the history of truth (cf. Derrida (1976 [1967])). That is to say, 'it offers not only a narrative account of certain stages on the path to Absolute Reason, but a metanarrative or God's-eye view that would finally transcend all mere relativities of place and time' (Norris 1987: 70).

Hegel's dialectic therefore claims to transcend all previous philosophies of mind and nature by showing how their various problems or antinomies are finally resolved through the movement of speculative thought - a movement epitomised in the famous Hegelian triad: thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Reason proceeds by positing an initial idea which then turns out to have further, contradictory implications beyond its power to explain or control (ibid.): the 'creative fire' which Harvey adopts from Marx's 'rubbing together of conceptual blocks.' In Hegelian logic, the only way out of the logical impasse in Reason's progress is to leap to a higher, dialectical plane of reasoning where the old contradiction no longer applies since its terms have been transformed in the process. This is the Hegelian moment of *Aufhebung* - the emergence of a logic of meaning undreamt of previously (cf. Hegel 1977). The key

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<sup>13</sup>In a similar vein, feminists have criticised Western philosophy and the rational tradition for its binarily opposed opposition of reason against unreason; this dualism is seen to anchor a whole range of further dualities: culture-nature; mind-body; male-female. (cf. Lloyd 1984; Whatmore 1997)

<sup>14</sup>see Marx's critique of the Hegelian Dialectic - in Marx (1975).



point, suggests Derrida, is that Hegel insists that language bears within itself the power to revive past meanings and intentions. For Derrida, this means that Hegel's whole project rests on the presence within language of a live, self-authenticating truth which allows us to pass through written signs and access a knowledge of their animating purpose. In his work, Derrida shows that this cannot be the case: language does not possess such a presence of truth (see Derrida 1976 [1967]; 1982 [1972]).

Consequently, Derrida's argument is that Hegel's logic - his dialectical approach - is in fact a series of elaborate conceptual techniques for reducing whatever exceeds its grasp to an order of structural necessity expressed in world-historical terms (Norris 1987). *Aufhebung*, the rubbing of dialectical blocks, becomes an 'arbitrary movement' within discourse - that is to say it only one reading among many, even if one which is sanctioned by all the resources of the Hegelian dialectic (ibid.). Thus, the implication from the Derridean critique is that 'since no logic governs, henceforth, the meaning of interpretation, because logic is an interpretation, Hegel's own interpretation can be reinterpreted - against him' (Derrida 1978b [1967]).

Thus, Derrida suggests there is no virtue *per se* in a dialectical approach. However, there is a further critique concerning problematic nature of Harvey's 'post-Marxist' concepts. The starting point is Derrida's understanding of 'difference'. Being largely concerned with language, Derrida coined the neologism 'différance' to suggest how meaning is at once "differential" and "differed": meaning is the product of a restless play within language that cannot be fixed or pinned down for the purposes of conceptual definition. (Derrida 1991 [1981]). Modern structural linguistics is underpinned by the view that signs don't have a meaning in and of themselves, but by virtue of their occupying a distinctive place within the systematic network of contrasts and differences which make up any given language (Norris 1987). This situation is complicated, according to Derrida, by the fact that 'meaning is nowhere punctually *present* [orig. emph] in language' but that it is 'always subject to a kind of semantic slippage (or deferral) which prevents the sign from ever coinciding with itself in a moment of perfect, remainderless grasp' (ibid. : 15). Consequently, the idea behind

the neologism is that 'différance' should function not as a static concept, not as 'a word whose meaning is finally booked into the present', but as 'one set of marks in a signifying chain which exceeds and disturbs the classical economy of language and representation' (ibid.: 15).

'Différance' is thus conceived as being the product of a 'long and meticulous process of argument' which cannot (and should not) be wrenched out of context for purposes of ad hoc definition (Norris 1987) - hence Derrida's insistence that to some extent it is pointless to ask what 'différance' means, unless you are willing to find out the hard way. In this sense 'différance' can be perhaps viewed as a concept with 'a non-self-identical' play of sense (Derrida 1978a [1967]), incompatible with the logocentric order of Western metaphysics. 'Différance' is a term constantly 'under erasure', deployed for tactical reasons but subject to a dislocating force which denies any kind of semantic or conceptual stability (see Derrida 1973 [1967]; 1991 [1982]).

The implication is that it is only possible to criticise existing institutions from *within* an inherited language: 'a discourse that will always have to be worked over in advance by traditional concepts and categories'. Derrida proposes that what is required is a kind of internal distancing (see Kearney 1984) - 'an effort of defamiliarization which prevents those concepts from settling down into routine habits of thought' (Norris 1987: 16). And this perhaps, is at the heart of the Derridean project with regard to 'différance': a recognition of the impossibility of thinking absolute difference which is somehow 'external' to discourse (s) but at the same time an attempt at producing a theoretical project which seeks to create internal distance (a type of rupture within discourse, if you like). The way in which Derrida seeks to do this is through his technique of deconstruction: a non-self-identical process which 'interrogates those various naive or pre-critical ideas of reference that envisage a straightforward matching up between language and the world outside (Derrida 1981a [1972]). Deconstruction must work to problematise such habits of thought by showing how strictly impossible it is to draw a firm line between reality and representation.

This is not the place to begin a lengthy review of debates concerning Derridean deconstruction. Rather, I wish to emphasise how much more potentially creative such an approach to theory is in terms of the scope for constructing new concepts. Harvey's dialectical materialism remains firmly within the western tradition of thought which Derrida criticises; it provides no scope to think outside a discourse of dialectically-produced concepts whose antecedents have been produced in historical process of binary synthesis. I have already argued that these concepts are inadequate, unable to cope with theorising the multiplicity of forces acting in social life.

In Harvey's words, dialectical thought is still about identifying a 'restricted number of very general underlying processes which simultaneously *unify and differentiate* [orig. emph.] the phenomena we see in the world around us' (Harvey 1996: 58). This form of ontological reductionism is advocated in a very qualified sense: dialectical thought does not reduce to "things" but to common generative processes and relations' (ibid.: 58). However, if we go about a process of deconstructing these ontological categories then we might question whether the distinction between "process" and "thing" is justified. Where and why should we determine boundaries between, for example, the fact of the built environment of the city in a capitalist system and the process of capital circulation which produces that environment? The point here is not that this is a valid or invalid ontological distinction, but that the approach always establishes a binary distinction between pre-existing concepts which embody many unacknowledged assumptions. Poststructural philosophy should teach us that this onto-epistemology is *too* stable, producing inflexible concepts. Instead I am arguing that we need an approach which allows the production of new, flexible concepts; to see how this might be done, I want to now look at another branch of poststructural philosophy.

### **Deleuze, Guattari and a rhizomatic epistemology**

Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze wrote a considerable volume of philosophy concerned with the nature of difference, what difference means and how we might go about thinking of it (Deleuze 1969; 1994 [1968]; Deleuze & Guattari 1972). Increasingly influential within human geography (cf. Barnes 1994; Doel 1996; Katz 1996), their ideas have considerable areas of common ground with Derrida and Foucault. However, I think their work has considerable, as yet unremarked, potential for producing new, flexible concepts which are much more enabling in the production of politically-engaged theory than the established, problematic concepts used by Harvey and other 'post-Marxists'. I will focus on two issues: their critique of the dialectical tradition and their development of a rhizomatic (or as I term it), 'multi-layered' onto-epistemology.

In their critique of dialectical thought, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the central philosophical problem in the western dialectical tradition 'consists of finding... the instance that is able to gauge a truth value of opposable opinions, either by selecting some as more wise than others or by fixing their respective share of the truth' (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 79). This reduces philosophy, they argue, to 'interminable discussion'. In this light, Hegelian dialectics makes use of 'the contradiction between rival opinions to extract from them suprascientific propositions able to move, contemplate, and communicate in themselves' (ibid.: 80). The problems which this tradition is that:

despite the highest ambitions of the dialectic, we fall back into the most abject conditions...: a reduction of the concept to propositions like simple opinions; false preceptions and bad feelings (illusions of transcendence or of universals) engulfing the plane of immanence<sup>15</sup> (ibid.: 80).

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<sup>15</sup>A 'plane of immanence' in the writing of Deleuze / Guattari is an abstract concept designed to express the existence of thoughts or things in a non-transcendental fashion. It is defined therefore as 'an absolute level at which things are grasped according to the immanent relations that constitute them' (after Goodchild 1996).

This is much the same point as Derrida's: that the concepts in dialectical thought suffer from onto-epistemological over-confidence; in Derridean terms, dialectically-derived concepts are imbued with 'a presence of meaning' which gives them an illusive quality of transcendence, of truth.<sup>16</sup> Again, it leads to a questioning, a need to deconstruct the very concepts used as the ontological bases of dialectical thought.

However, Deleuze and Guattari adopt a rather different approach which I think has greater potential for the developing an epistemology of flexible concepts than Derrida's work. In the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Anti-Oedipus* (1973) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1982), they develop what they term a 'schizo-analytic enterprise', specifically characterised by a non-bounded disciplinary and theoretical approach. This is characterized by the idea of the rhizome, developed throughout their work. The rhizome represents

a multiplicity that cannot be understood in terms of the traditional problems of the One and the Many, of origins and genesis, or of deep structures, in which any point can be connected to any other point, and any sequence of elements can be broken at any juncture. (Bogue 1989.: 125)

In other words, the rhizome is a notion which incorporates inherent flexibility in thought (cf. Massumi 1996): it allows the multiple combination and re-combination of elements in a creative and flexible fashion which constantly reinforces what Derrida might call 'the play of difference' (Derrida 1978a). Deleuze and Guattari implement the rhizome in their ontology / epistemology in a way which enables them to tackle the sticky issue of multiplicity. For example, Bogue (1989) argues that each of the fifteen chapters of *A Thousand Plateaus*' represents itself 'a plateau, a plane of consistency, or level of intensity which traverses any number of traditional disciplinary domains and levels of analysis' (ibid.: 125). Each of these 'plateau' has its

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<sup>16</sup>Deleuze's philosophy also engages with Hegelian dialectics in its discussion of Bergson's conception of duration. For a discussion of Deleuze / Bergson see Deleuze (1988a [1966]) and also in relation to Hegel and dialectics, see Butler (1987); Game (1991).

own themes and concepts which are interrelated with those of other plateaux and which appear in other plateaus, but which 'are not finally reducible to any abstract system or "plateau of plateaus" ' (ibid.: 125). In this sense, Deleuze and Guattari maintain a consistent element of flexibility and creativity in their work: the concepts they develop are rhizomatic in that they are composed of several elements simultaneously, and they are flexible in that there is always scope for their reconfiguration along different lines.

Deleuze and Guattari's approach is one where multiple concepts which are rigorously delineated and closely interrelated form 'loose resonating aggregates rather than finite structures'. The principle of formation of these aggregates is thus strictly additive and open-ended (Bogue 1989). The value of this loose aggregation has been asserted by Cindi Katz (1995; 1996) in her discussion of 'minor theory'. Katz picks up on this aspect of Deleuze and Guattari's work in arguing that we need to cause ruptures within major theory by deploying minor theories. For Deleuze and Guattari, the 'minor' is the key to subversion, escape or discursive transformation; Katz suggests it is a form of 'becoming' where the minor reworks the major from within - in Foucaultian terminology this might be described as rupturing discourse from within.

However it is expressed, the flexibility of the Deleuzo-Guattarian approach to ontology / epistemology is the key point. As Katz points out, Deleuze and Guattari present a basis through which to produce politically-engaged theory which appreciates the multiplicity and instability of the concepts we need to understand social life: 'gender is not class and class is not race; and the maps of their politics are not homologous. Yet we are lost... if we think they are separate worlds. (Katz 1996: 495)'. And this is the crux of my argument for abandoning the type of 'post-Marxism' used by Harvey: what is needed is a framework which avoids the binary trap of dialectics, and which provides the ability to produce flexible concepts. In the remainder of this paper, I will briefly sketch one possible framework around which this might be done.

## **5 CONTEXTUAL THEORY: RECONSIDERING THE CASE OF HAMLET**

The question now is how can ‘post-‘ theory produce something I agree with Harvey is crucial: ‘a common language for expression’ (Harvey 1996: 14)? I concur with Harvey’s argument that there is a need for some form of ‘meta-theory’ if politically-engaged theory is to be produced, but I do not think the answer lies with ‘post-Marxism’ for the reasons I have outlined. Instead I will argue for a ‘meta-theory’ informed by ‘post-‘ writing which takes the need for a multi-layered onto-epistemology and flexible concepts seriously. The key to this lies in an ontology of context.

### *(i) The need for 'contextual theory'*

Contemporary human geography has become highly concerned with place (e.g. Keith & Pile 1993; Smith 1993; Duncan & Ley 1993; McDowell 1997) as the site of analysis. It is in ‘place’ that social interaction and activity occurs in space-time, and as such place has become increasingly understood as the location of political struggle and the arena for a ‘spatialized politics’ (Keith & Pile 1993). Thus, geographers are already centrally concerned with what many people would take as a synonym for ‘context.’

However, I think ‘context’ should be understood as something more than place. My argument is that human geography exhibits a problematic epistemological fetishization of space. In the last fifteen years or so, ‘space’ has become a fashionably concept within social theory (cf. Jameson, Berger, Foucault). Geographers have joined this *vogue* for reintroducing space into social theory where it has previously been neglected (for example, Soja’s (1996) recent development of Bhabha’s (1993) Thirdspace concept) However, Massey (1993) makes an important point: she finds recent conceptualizations of ‘space’ and the ‘spatial’ problematic, contested and unclear (Massey 1993: 141). Massey goes on to complain that the effect of this

confusion is 'to effectively depoliticise the realm of the spatial' (ibid.: 142). Whilst for some, a place-based politics is the answer to this problem, I do not think that a reliance on the concept of place is sufficient. 'Place' implicitly emphasises the spatial aspects of social life which I would argue is as conceptually and theoretically restrictive as 'post-Marxist' usages of class, capital or gender. What is needed is a form of ontology / epistemology which is designed to tackle the complexity of social life, as opposed 'to riding roughshod over ambiguity and polarising complexity' (Thrift 1998). What is needed is an ontology / epistemology which allows us to produce a flexible theorisation of context. Two recent literatures in particular within geography represent a move in this direction.

First, actor-network theory (ANT) (cf. Pile 1993; Law 1994; Pile & Thrift 1995; Bingham 1997; Leyshon & Pollard 1997) exhibits some of the features of what we could call a multi-layered epistemology. The actor-network approach sees social agency as a 'precarious achievement' with agency understood through the metaphor of the network (Law 1994). Agency is seen as being continually (re)constructed through multiple, competing processes of ordering which generate 'effects' - in terms of what we are concerned about here, ANT provides ways of understanding, for example, class action as a constructed, contingent and most importantly, *multiple* effect. Politicised class action would be seen as the outcome of a process of ordering which could span numerous conceptual fields (gender, historical factors, race) as viewed in Harvey's approach.

The second literature considers 'non-representational theory' (cf. Thrift 1996a). Thrift more specifically makes reference to the issue of context, viewing it as 'a necessary constitutive element of interaction' (ibid.: 3). He argues for what he terms 'modest theory'; this is theory 'with a lighter touch' which focuses on social practice in a way that 'stresses the radical incompleteness and contextuality found in poststructural thought' but which also 'stresses the limits and boundaries to that kind of thought' (ibid.: 31). Context is central to this approach but it is not seen as a synonym for 'place'. Rather, Thrift suggests context should be understood as 'a



performative social situation, a plural event which is more or less spatially extensive and temporally specific.'

This is a crucial point. Context is not just about space or place; it needs to be understood as incorporating at least three ontological 'fields': space, time and social practice. This ontological basis for the production of theory sensitive to this - contextual theory<sup>17</sup>- has a number of broad arguments. First, context needs to be understood in such a way that no specific ontological field is necessarily prioritised. Context should not be understood through the lenses of space or place, universal or particular. Actor-network theory does at least illustrate how agency spans all these ontological fields but it seems far too narrow to try and theorise agency which focuses on any one. Unfortunately, ANT is limited in this way as its epistemology is dominated by the spatial metaphor of the network. Instead, contextual theory is about deploying concepts in an intersecting fashion - in a way which places no necessary emphasis on framing theory around one particular ontological field. Context is simultaneously spatial, temporal and social, and therefore I would argue all three need to be co-present in theory which tackles complexity effectively

Second, the difficulty with non-representational and actor-network approaches is that the theory produced retains the sense of 'radical incompleteness' which Thrift refers to. That is fine for academics versed in such debates, but remains ambiguous for politicians and policy-makers. Surely in seeking to produce politically-engaged theory, there is a need to set clear theoretical frameworks upon which people can act? I would suggest the answer to this issue is implement an onto-epistemology which formalizes the inherent flexibility of the concepts being created. If, as Katz points out, class, race and gender are inseparable, yet their political configurations differ depending on the issue, then there is a need for new understandings of the class-race-

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<sup>17</sup> The onto-epistemological stance I outline is not intended to represent the basis for a new, singular meta-theory in the way that Harvey argues dialectical materialism is the epistemological paradigm which should be adopted.. There is no one 'contextual theory'. Rather different contextual theories are produced according to the requirements of a specific context for the production of knowledge. Likewise the concepts used are themselves flexible, and produced in the act of constructing theory, as opposed to being 'brought to' a context to allow us to theorise it.

gender intersection; this is the flexible basis for the new concepts of contextual theory. The idea of a class-race-gender intersection is not a fully developed concept in itself because it is abstracted from context; there are many possible creative formations which could be derived through this epistemological construct. The important point is that there is a flexible (and multiple, rhizomatic) element to the concepts developed in contextual theories which enable them to be transferable without being rigidly defined in the way Harvey's concepts are.

(ii) *Reconsidering the case of Hamlet*

The argument for producing contextual theories is better elaborated through an exploration as to how such an approach would be implemented in Harvey's Hamlet case study.

Obviously, in beginning to re-think Hamlet there has to be the recognition that I bring to the analysis a range of value judgements - in this case concerning social justice; there is, of course, no escaping this as all forms of knowledge are positioned and situated (cf. Haraway 1988; Whatmore 1997). However, assuming I bring to the case study similar judgements about social justice as Harvey - that I want to examine the possibility of empowering the workers in the US chicken processing industry - then the implementation of a contextual approach is rather different to a 'post-Marxist' one. The first phase both assesses the relevance of existing concepts *and* thinks creatively about the utility of new conceptual configurations. Thus, the common 'gender' experience of the female chicken factory workers might be one of several starting points. However, a contextual approach then scrutinises the axes of how gender intersects with other concepts.

Given that I regard the position of the women workers as disempowered, these conceptual intersections allow me to explore the nature of inequitable power relations across different 'ontological fields' simultaneously. For example, given the historical context of chicken farming in the Hamlet region, its relationship with the culture of organizational practice in the Chicken factories, and also national and regional legal

conditions, it is possible to develop a multi-layered theorisation of the potential for political organization and / or policy initiatives which specify gender as a point of empowerment. Although gender is the conceptual point of entry, it is not prioritised in isolation in the concomitant process of theory construction, but rather used in its intersections with other relevant groups of concepts (e.g. scales, historical factors, cultural attributes).

Harvey's analysis of Hamlet is trapped because it cannot de-prioritise key 'old' concepts: the central problematic for Harvey is the unfeasible nature of class-based political action. Whilst the working conditions of women on the factory floor may lend itself to political organization, the local, regional and national political institutions in that part of the US would perhaps be hostile to such union-style organization. Harvey recognises this, but has little in the way of theory about how to overcome the problem. Contextual theories represent a formalized and ordered way of arriving at / presenting arguments for a political movement which spans multiple time and spatial scales, as well as different aspects of social practice. Worker organizations might be better advised to try to force the regulation and surveillance of safety regulations by incorporating sympathetic managers, local politicians, local and national media into their project. Once within this multi-layered framework, it is then possible to develop further an assessment of the project's feasibility - for example, considering the likely reception of such an approach amongst differing chicken factory organizational cultures, amongst manager attitudes, values and cultures in the industry or the viability of incorporating national media.

This may appear to be a development of *some* of the suggestions which come from Harvey's 'post-Marxist' analysis. However, my point is that Harvey's approach *can never* get this far: the dialectical opposition of ill-scrutinised concepts leaves a gaping disjuncture between how 'post-Marxist' theory presents the world, and many of Harvey's sensible and politically-empowering recommendations. More importantly, many conceptual avenues are left unexplored because the 'post-Marxist' epistemology is too narrow, prioritising one ontological field at a time in the

dialectical play of concepts. In this sense, Harvey's suggestions for political engagement appear to occur haphazardly, arising in ambiguity from theory which often bears no relation to the onto-epistemology. Harvey makes observations and recommendations about Hamlet which have no secure epistemological basis because dialectical thought cannot furnish him with adequate (flexible) concepts.

## **6 CONCLUSION**

The title of this paper suggests that it is 'against' Harvey's form of 'post-Marxism'. And yet this is not wholly true. Derrida (1994) argues that his deconstructive approach has never been Marxist, but that equally it has never been non-Marxist. The distinction is subtle, but important. Deconstruction remains faithful to at least one of Marxism's spirits – at least to one because 'there is more than one of them and they are heterogeneous' (ibid: 71). Contemporary theory is inextricably bound into the legacy of Marxism and there remain certain aspects of that which are important. However, there are equally many elements which subsequent arguments have undermined. The aim of this paper has been to argue that one spirit of Marxism – in the form of dialectical materialism - is not the most effective way of producing politically engaged theory. At the same time, the very notion of a radical politically-engaged theory owes a great deal to another spirit of Marxism.

Thus, I think these two Marxist 'spirits' are in conflict in the dialectical 'post-Marxism' espoused in JNGD. Radical political theory can not be produced, I have argued, through the unproblematised ontology / epistemology which Harvey adheres to. Consequently, in concluding, I cannot emphasise enough my opposition to Harvey's dismissal of 'post-' thought as a 'hyper-relativist' fantasy. Unfortunately, David Harvey's own positionality within the discipline means that such words are taken very seriously. Harvey's sentiments serve to reinforce the widespread reluctance to think beyond traditional approaches to social science, such as Marxism, even though they appear to have been undermined by the 'post-' critique. Thus, it is important to counter these restrictive arguments. I have argued at length that Harvey

offers a scant reading of the 'post-' critique – a literature which in fact exposes 'post-Marxist' doctrine to fatal onto-epistemological flaws. Harvey's attempt in JNGD to synthesise Marxian epistemology with 'post-' theory is misconstrued in that it fails to tackle the key ontological problematics of inflexible concepts and a dialectical way of thinking which operates within a restrictive binary frame.

In short, if the production of knowledge and theory is about producing understandings of the web of complexity which is social life, as well as political-action prescriptions, then there are very strong arguments to suggest that dialectical thought and 'post-Marxism' are not sufficient to meet the challenge. Consequently, the final sections have sought to explore an alternative 'meta-framework' for onto-epistemology by advocating the development of contextual theories where the concepts used incorporate formalized flexibility: they incorporate abstract aspects which are transferable, but these 'mobile' elements are not the total concepts. Rather, concepts only become fully developed in their implementation in specific contexts. And most significantly, contextual theories do not prioritise any ontological field in this process of theory construction: context is simultaneously spatial, temporal and social.

Overall, the goal of Harvey's 'post-Marxist' stance is to retain the political engagement of the Marxist human geography of the 1970s and 1980s. As Corbridge (1998) states in his review of JNGD, 'it matters that we don't lose sight of the appalling and shared poverty that faces so many people in the world today'. Yet Harvey is right to resist 'surrendering to the politics only of Difference' and 'the tyranny of the text' (ibid. : 15). I agree entirely with the former statement but not with the latter; this represents only retrenchment. There are *serious* flaws with any form of 'post-Marxist' onto-epistemology - flaws which I see as fatal to that framework. And in that sense Marxism can only become ever less radical and politically-empowering as its theoretical arguments become ever more remote from social realities. Human geographers need to get over their reservations, grit their teeth, and abandon the type of 'post-Marxism' Harvey prescribes. Only then can they get on with the important

task of reconstructing politically-empowering theories from postmodern thought, which suggests, to end by returning to Derrida's (1994) thoughts on Marx, that whilst I am against Harvey's dialectical materialism, I am wholly for this other 'spirit of Marx' to which we owe the very idea of radicalism itself. And one way of rekindling that radical spirit might be through the development of what I have termed contextual theories.

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