City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: Jones, A. (1999). Notes from the Deck of the Postmodern Titanic: A Response to David Harvey. Progress in Human Geography, 23(4), pp. 563-566. doi: 10.1177/030913259902300404

This is the unspecified version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/2975/

Link to published version: https://doi.org/10.1177/030913259902300404

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to City Research Online policy.

City Research Online: http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/ publications@citystgeorges.ac.uk

NOTES FROM THE DECK OF THE POSTMODERN TITANIC: A RESPONSE TO DAVID HARVEY.

Andrew Jones

The problem with David Harvey's *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference, as* a number of its reviewers have expressed, is that it is not so much one book as many (cf. Eagleton 1997; Fainstein 1998; Young 1998). It deals in a vast array of philosophical, theoretical and politicised ideas to a degree that any critical engagement with it must confront the necessity of limiting its scope. This fact is I think central to the flaws in both my original paper critiquing Harvey's 'dialectical historical-materialism', and in his subsequent response.

In his lengthy critical response to my article, Harvey raises a considerable number of points, some more important than others. There are, I think, four major criticisms which require an extended response, and I will turn to these shortly. However, there are also a range of points which I suggest are designed to dismiss my arguments out of hand, relying on turns of rhetoric to achieve their affect. For example, the response is littered with diminutive or trivialising comments arguing I am criticising his approach 'because [he] has read the wrong rather than the right stuff', or that my implementation of *some* of the insights produced from Derrida's work means that I am some kind of Derridean 'acolyte'. These are clever textual devices which I cannot, as space is limited, address one by one.

Indeed, much of Harvey's response is concerned to point to the flaws which arise from misrepresentation, omissions and possible connotations within argument: some of which of are trenchant and some which I feel are unjustified. In particular, Harvey suggests that in using Derrida I write 'something which he would never have written'. This is misplaced as I had no intention of doggedly adopting a Derridean stance which itself has been criticised at length as leaving little scope for the construction of politically-engaged theory (cf. Norris 1993; Beardsworth 1996). Nor do I suggest that Harvey alone is problematically situated in the western tradition, or that there is only one way to understand 'dialectics', or that I am in some way essentialising 'post-Marxism', or that I am fitting 'everything into the 'post-' mode. And so it goes, as Harvey might say.

Rather, I will concentrate here on the more developed and salient criticisms which Harvey elaborates in amongst his persuasive writing. First and foremost of these, there is Harvey's vituperative response to my suggestion that his dialectical materialism relies on the interaction of problematic 'black-box' binarily opposed categories. In considering this, I realised that my continuing discomfort with Harvey's recurrent call for a reconstructed post-modernised Marxism rests not so much the philosophical discussion of Althusser or Whitehead's dialectical ontology, as with the practical implementation of dialectical thinking in the way he constructs politicised theory. Harvey accuses me of making 'an extraordinary claim which would irradicate as "fatally flawed" the thought' of a range of continental philosophy. Such a point requires a response, primarily because I have no such intention.

Now I am not in the business of beginning to argue that Harvey is somehow pervasively 'wrong', nor have I argued or will I argue that 'his work' is 'fatally flawed' in some universalising fashion. My focus was much more specific than that. What I am

seeking to criticise, and indeed what I am arguing is 'fatally-flawed' (or at least an unproductive starting point for the production of politically-engaged theory as 'fatality' is perhaps too brutal a language), is the implementation of Harvey's specific 'brand' of dialectical thought in JNGD. The paper is centrally concerned with the way in which Harvey's desire for politically-engaged theory is produced through *his* interpretation of dialectical thinking. He complains that I make a crude transition from his argument concerning the 'rubbing together of conceptual blocks in such a way that they catch fire' to a representation of his argument as relying on a crude 'interaction of conceptual categories in some form of binarily opposed relationship'. This is fair comment to a degree, because the paper fails to account for the differences between the way dialectics is discussed at the philosophical level, and the way it becomes implemented in the discussion of politically-engaged theory. But I think that in this implementation, for all the preceding discussion of contingent relations, the latter chapters of the book deal in the same, wooden, often binarily-opposed concepts.

Thus we confront the issue of JNGD being a book of disjunctive elements. In fact, it represents an amalgamation of Harvey's writing over some time, and as such I think contains much which is contradictory and this is particularly true of his use of dialectics. Whilst Harvey examines at length the fluidity of Whitehead's dialectical framework, at the end of the day, *when* it comes to consider whichever case studies Harvey turns to, we are still confronted with familiar, binarily-opposed categories and categories. And that is true as much in the over-analysed Hamlet chicken-factory fire as in Harvey's assertion that environmental theory requires a similar re-insertion of the 'dialectical relation' between nature and society (Harvey 1996: 184). In asserting that 'human beings, like all other organisms, are 'active subjects transforming nature according to its laws', Harvey remains firmly trapped in a nature-society binary division which is increasingly being lamented by a growing (and already substantial) literature (e.g. Haraway 1991; Latour 1995; 1996; Gare 1995).

His second key criticism is that my article 'falls into the pit of its own binary-making', and this is a significant issue which needs addressing. The point that I sought to make, in hindsight perhaps not sufficiently well-developed in the paper, was not that all binaries are bad *per se* in some form of ontological knee-jerk reaction, but that the actual epistemology / post-Marxian theory developed by Harvey *is*. Indeed binary oppositions are pervasive in western thought, although there may be ways to address the growing number of limitations they present to creative thinking (Latour 1995). Consequently, to criticise the paper for making use of binary terminology at the rhetorical level has limited force. In retrospect, my primary concern should have been with the limitations of the way dialectical thinking is implemented (or perhaps not sufficiently implemented) by Harvey in his form of post-Marxism. If Althusserian (and Whitehead's) dialectical thought is based around flexibility and fluidity in a way that Hegelian dialectics does not incorporate, then I would argue that Harvey's actually existing post-Marxist stance is not.

Thirdly, Harvey suggests that I merely assert the flaws of his dialectical thought, rather than substantiating it. This seems a remarkable response given that the paper works through the argument over, substantiating it through a discussion of the Hamlet case. As I have intimated in this response, a similar approach might have equally been employed in considering his arguments about the dialectics of nature-society.

His fourth major point, however, indicates the limitations of my suggestion for a move towards what I termed 'contextual theories'. Whilst the criticism of an 'epistemological fetishization of space' would have been better directed at others rather than Harvey, what remains is the inconsistent nature of JNGD as a book. For as Demeritt (1998) suggests in his review, the philosophical aspects to the book remain distanced from the engaged theory. Whilst Harvey might be right to argue that an ontology of three fields (space, time and social practice) remains 'unstirring', in the end his own considerations of space-time as contingent relations seem not to feed into discussions of engaged theory where he continues to adhere to the same, familiar concepts. For example, in criticising the 'contemporary emphasis on the local' (Harvey 1996: 353), he suggests that this emphasis 'totally erases others and thereby truncates rather than emancipates the field of political engagement and action' (ibid.:353). He goes onto assert that 'we can never ever be purely local beings' and that ' while membership in one sort of permanence defined at a given scale may be more important to each of us than others such identifications…are rarely so singular.' There is no consideration of what the local means, how it is constructed, how this concept might or might not be useful. There is no sense here of the fluidity of space-time as discussed earlier in the book.

Clearly, both my critique and a contextual approach need to be developed to overcome the flaws of my earlier arguments. However, what Harvey's response does not do is convince me that his dialectical materialism is all he purports it to be. It misses the point of my critique to jibe that 'postmodernists' might fantasise that capitalism does not exist. The whole issue is that I think that there is a pressing need to produce more practical theories of political action. Perhaps Althusserian dialectical fluidity does enable much greater scope for the development of flexible concepts to provide the basis for politically-engaged theory, but my feeling may be that that has more to do with the fluidity than the dialectical element. If geographers are to be listened to at all (and presumably this at least is an objective which David Harvey shares with me), then I would still argue strongly that it is problematic to continue to implement a dialectical post-Marxism whose concepts seem increasingly old-fashioned and wooden when put through their paces in the real world.

1500 words

References

Beardsworth, R (1996) Derrida & the political. (London: Routledge.)

Demerrit, D. (1998) Review of 'Justice, Nature & the Geography of Difference'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 23, 2:* 284-286.

Eagleton, T. (1997) Spaced out. *London Review of Books* 19: 22-23

Fainstein, S. (1998) Review of 'Justice, Nature & the Geography of Difference'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 22, 2: 339-341*

Gare, A. (1995) Postmodernism and the environmental crisis. (London: Routledge.)

Haraway, D. (1991) Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the reinvention of nature. (London; Free Association Books.)

Harvey, D. (1996) Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference. (Oxford: Blackwell.)

Latour, B. (1995) We Have Never Been Modern. (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.)
Latour, B. (1996) Aramas, or the love of technology. (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.)
Norris, C. (1993) The Truth about Postmodernism. (Oxford: Blackwell.)
Young, I. M. (1998) Harvey's Complaint with Race and Gender Struggles. *Antipode 30, 1: 36-42*