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## **FROM MARXIST GEOGRAPHY TO CRITICAL GEOGRAPHY AND BACK AGAIN**

By

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### **Introduction**

My topic is critical human geography and its relation to Marxist geography or what David Harvey has called historical geographical materialism (henceforth HGM). That there is some overlap is clear. Equally there are quite strong frictions. I want to identify those frictions and explain why a Marxist can't possibly be comfortable with critical human geography. On the other hand, there is something to be learnt both from its emergence and from its very varied claims.

As to emergence, we can date that of Marxist geography fairly easily. Although it had its precursors in people like Keith Buchanan, there is no intellectual movement around it

until the work of David Harvey in the early 'seventies. Critical human geography, or CHG, as I will call it for short, is more recent, but less easy to date. Marxist geography is also fairly easy to define, and CHG less so. Marxist geography has been committed to applying classical Marxism to a redefinition and understanding of human geography; a redefinition of the classic interests in place and space, differentiation and connection into themes of geographically uneven development, colonialism, and territorial struggle, among others. The way in which contradiction is then given geographic expression has been mobilized in understanding these forms. While one would not define Marxist geography as an intellectually closed body of thought, it has a clear internal coherence. CHG is different. As Joe Painter has pointed out, while it shares the interest of Marxist geography in relations of inequality and oppression, in practice it is conceptually quite pluralistic, even eclectic. As such it has been influenced by such different, if often overlapping, theoretical currents as feminism, the various posts-, to be sure, and, of course, Marxism itself.

As a Marxist, my attitude to CHG is thoroughly ambivalent. On the one hand I share with many Marxists a feeling that it is politically a distraction, also that it has got things wrong theoretically in a quite profound way. On the other, I think that it has had some useful effects, provoking Marxists to re-examine their arguments and to re-work Marxist theory in ways appropriate to the concrete challenges that it faces. In trying to come to terms with the animal that it is, I think that a little historical background is useful. I do that in the first part of the paper. In the second section I move on to a characterization of critical human geography; what it shares amongst its seemingly quite disparate parts and how that defines it against Marxist geography. In the penultimate section I make some critical comments and in the conclusions I suggest that despite its shortcomings the CHG moment has been productive, if not necessarily in ways that it might have desired or would even agree with.

### **A Little History**

It is well known that Marxist geography came into being partly in critical response to the spatial analysis that had dominated the field, or for some, had cast a shadow over it, in the

'sixties. Harvey's identification of it as showing little interest in the social problems of the day, as engaging in exercises which fed the dominant technocratic understanding of the world and its dilemmas, and as hewing to a theory which could, in its application, only reproduce the world as it was, was cogent. Perhaps less noticed was the way in which elements of his critique reinforced sentiments which were abroad somewhat more generally in human geography at that time. Though they might not have read *Social Justice and the City* geographers were evincing increasing interest in the problems of the city, the environment, development, race and poverty.<sup>1</sup> We should recall here that *Antipode* started out as an expression of that broader interest and only later raised the Marxist flag.<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to Thomas Kuhn's arguments about the take-up of new paradigms in the physical sciences, however, in the social sciences things are invariably messier. Contradictory or not, some will persist in combining elements of the old and the new. Others take up some elements of the new but find the totality of it a challenge. It is, by definition, 'new'; a new language has to be learnt and it is not an easy process. It certainly cannot be immediate. My point is, however, that Marxist geography *always* had what I will call a 'soft underbelly': a group anxious to say something relevant and critical, and combining various bits and pieces of the Marxist world view, but often ending up with a rather eclectic mix of concepts – a Marxism without the law of value, a Marxism privileging competition and exchange rather than class and production, for example, or simply a concern for unequal outcomes. I will say more about this later on, but I want to signal its importance now.

Marxist geography was not alone in providing a critique of spatial analysis. There was also, and perhaps we need to remind ourselves, something rather interesting and thought-provoking called *humanistic geography*. This was somewhat less caught up in the social

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the Problems Series in Geography published by McGraw-Hill in the early 'seventies and including titles like *The Geography of Poverty in the United States*, *The Black Ghetto*, and *The Geography of Social Well-Being in the United States*.

<sup>2</sup> Harvey's initial forays into a more socially relevant geography were themselves ones that he characterized as 'liberal' rather than 'socialist.' See especially Chapter 2 in Harvey (1973).

relevance movement. Rather it opposed agency to the spatial determinism of spatial analysis, the importance of place to the imperatives of space, the qualitative to the quantitative and, significantly, of culture to the dominant economism of the location theory embraced by the spatial-quantitative revolution. However, humanistic geography positioned itself not just with respect to spatial analysis, but also with respect to the emergent Marxist geography. This too was to be pilloried as deterministic and economistic, most notoriously in a highly influential paper by Jim Duncan and David Ley (1982). However, a major problem with humanistic geography was that it lacked strong theoretical underpinnings and that detracted from it as a credible response to the Marxist challenge.<sup>3</sup> Rather the really serious response was the emergence in the early 'eighties of what has come to be called 'the new cultural geography.'

Cultural geography had endured what it must have thought of as the dark days of the spatial quantitative revolution. But it was not until after the stimulus of humanistic geography that it could begin to mount its own serious intellectual challenge. This was to come about as a result of the absorption of new intellectual forces, coming from the most part out of France, and with a strongly anti-marxist character that happily combined with the ideological pretensions of the, by then, fading humanistic geography. These were the various posts-, post-modernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism, though the latter was more a creation of people working in the Anglophone world, notably Edward Said. The universalistic claims of Marxism, mainstream social science could now be opposed by the claims of difference, of discursive formation and subjectification, of a will to power, that ultimately drew philosophical sustenance from, we should note, the rather ambiguous, if not plain dubious, source of Friedrich Nietzsche.<sup>4</sup>

Other things were going on. The most important of these was feminist geography. This developed in the context of the women's movement of the 'seventies. Part of this current attached itself to Marxist geography, but the attractions of the new cultural geography were also very strong and came to dominate work in the field. Between the universalistic

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<sup>3</sup> It did, however, lead to the agency-structure debate, albeit a debate that never seems to have seriously registered, useful as it was.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Wolin 2004.

claims of Marxism and the embrace of the particular it seemed that the latter was the more attractive of the two. This mirrored what was happening outside the academy as, as Harvey (1996) has pointed out, class was being sidelined by race and gender as touchstones of oppositional politics in the US.

Meanwhile, and despite some very real achievements, notably those of Harvey in spatializing Marx, Marxist geography had stalled. Apart from a few people who kept the flag flying – Harvey obviously, some of his students, notably Neil Smith, Dick Walker, Andy Merrifield, Erik Swyngedouw along with people like John Holmes, Ray Hudson and Mike Webber – the soft, *marxisant* underbelly merging with various reformist liberal impulses took over. What now seemed to prevail was a version of what Robert Brenner (1977) has called neo-smithian Marxism. Significantly, instead of talking about Marxist geography or HGM, people started referring to ‘political economy.’ Perhaps even worse yet, in political ecology people who had given it an early historical materialist stamp, now increasingly embraced ideas coming from the new cultural geography.

Paul Robbins has some interesting comments to make in this regard in his recent book (2004). He states:

“To avoid mistakes of reductionism, it (political ecology) needs to operate less from the universal and more from the particular, explore the context as well as the conditions of power, and eschew any simple narratives of social difference rooted in single-variable explanations. All the same, it must do so with a serious dedication to the material underpinnings of social life.” (p.50).

So while he can be accused of fence sitting, the drift away from HGM is clear enough. To this one can only add: *tant pis*.

In a number of ways human geography shares this history with other of the human sciences. The cultural tide has become a very strong one and has been reinforced by currents coming out of literary studies. It has been reinforced by the growing interest in feminist studies and the way in which many, perhaps most, feminists have turned their backs against class politics in favor of a politics of representation. And, alas, alas, neo-

smithian Marxism rules, as is apparent from the most cursory inspection of such journals as *Review of International Political Economy* or *New Political Economy* or, closer to home, *The International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*.

### **Critical Human Geography**

The result of these developments is what has come to be called ‘critical human geography.’ As Joe Painter (2000) observes in his entry on the topic in the *Dictionary of Human Geography*, this is an eclectic mix. One way of characterizing it, I am going to argue, is in terms of two major wings: a ‘political economy’ wing and a ‘cultural’ one; hence the frequent talk or babble about ‘political economy’ and ‘culture.’ These are happy to subsist alongside each other, even occasionally draw on one another, and so combine their quite different contributions in the same study.

Consider what in practice these relatively self-enclosed approaches or perspectives seem to amount to. For ‘political economy’ the focus is material inequality, the condition of the less privileged, and how these are expressed spatially. Ideas of spatial or environmental justice are part of the implicit framing of work in this genre. The interpretive framework is dominated by ideas of market forces, especially competition, and the superior leverage enjoyed by capital, particularly the major firms, like the multinationals. The ‘political’ part of ‘political economy’ enters in through the way in which state agents are mobilized or affected in their actions by corporations. Major recent foci of interest have included globalization, including world cities, and neo-liberalism, with the latter now coming up very strongly and overtaking the former. The same concern for the relation between state and economy is evident, however, with some theoretical gloss given to it through references to regulation theory which, as a result of the way it foregrounds competition and consumption and marginalizes ideas of class and production, is a significant choice anyway. Across wide swathes of human geography what Paul Robbins has called ‘a broadly defined political economy’ (p.52) now rules.

The ‘cultural’ wing of CHG emphasizes a different set of oppressions. These are less ones of a material nature, though these can still be important for those feminist

geographers with a stronger affinity to HGM, but more ones of social significance, of identity, of hierarchy. Accordingly, gender, racial, and colonial oppressions, the oppressions of lay people by experts, take up the field of vision. These are seen as cultural in origin, but with a strong political inflexion. Representation and therefore the imputation of meaning and how these are linked to what have been called (Seidman 1992) ‘practical-moral’ projects are central to this mode of understanding. This means that discourse is a key concept. Discourses are seen as subjectifying, as forming particular identities, as falsely universalizing, as justifying particular institutional orders and so bringing about relations of domination and subordination. This is the basis for the critique of so-called ‘grand narratives’ and the emphasis on particularity and difference.

Stated thus, there doesn’t seem much to unite what I have identified as the two distinct wings of CHG. One wonders, therefore, just where coherence might lie. I think that in fact there are several features of approach which bring them together. There are also omissions – omissions I judge to be centrally important – which they share.

The first thing to point out is that they both subscribe, in their quite different ways, to fragmented views of the world. This, it should be underlined, was something that was starting in the ’seventies with the critique of marxist geography by humanistic geography. What came out of that were a series of dualisms, overlapping and reinforcing, which started to place the cultural on one side and the economic on the other, as follows:

political economy / culture

material / ideal

objective / subjective

structure / agency

But as cultural geography morphed into the *new* cultural geography, for the emergent ‘culture’ wing of what was to be CHG, the right side took over and assimilated the left. The material was seemingly subordinated to the ideal, the economic to the cultural, structure to agency, and so forth. Fragmentation now assumed a different form: that of particularity. The particularities of context, combined with the will to power, formed the humus for the construction of distinct social worlds, for Difference, and the identification

of seemingly multiple Others to exclude and marginalize. Universality, totality were not just downright impossible, but oppressive to boot. The parts might interact, bounce off each other, but only as separate parts irreducible to any principle of social unity.

‘Political economy’ has seemingly, by default, accepted the categorizations of it that started to emerge in the ‘seventies: as concerned with structure, rather than agency, with the material rather than the ideal, as indeed, ‘economistic’, though its practitioners would hesitate to use what is clearly seen as a term of abuse. But, nevertheless, they have shown virtually no interest in the realm of meaning, of discourse, even in the terms of ideology inherited from Marxist geography except in the most descriptive, unexamined sense, as in ‘the ideologies of neo-liberalism’ or ‘globalization.’ Implicitly, at least, the notion of totality has been rejected. The fragmentations of the world that we live in, that we experience on a day to day basis, including in the academic world, as economists, geographers, anthropologists, etc., are, it would seem, uncritically accepted. Accordingly, even within its own self-enclosed interpretive framework of ‘political economy’ the ‘political’ and the ‘economic’ are held apart. Rather ‘states’ and ‘economies’ interact. So, and for example, globalization threatens the power of states; or neo-liberal policies result in geographically uneven development. And so it goes.

In quite contrasting ways, therefore, the ‘political economy’ and ‘cultural’ wings of CHG have come to share views of the world as made up of interacting, separate, even self-constituting, parts; what Marx would have called ‘things in themselves.’ These things have their own histories, coming together in all manner of unexpected, contingent, ways, and giving a priority to the conjunctural that again is at odds with Marxist geography. This is the second feature that the ‘political economy’ and ‘culture’ wings share.

The significance of context, of course, figures quite centrally in the interpretive framework of the new cultural geography, and this gives some priority to the concept of place. Where this can lead to as far as geography is concerned has been recently underlined by Massey (2005) in her own distinctive case against ‘grand narratives.’ Geography, the very possibility of the intersection, juxtaposition of different conditions,

influences, stories, provides the condition for new stories, new structures of social relations, new worlds that we cannot possibly anticipate. The future, or rather the future time-space, is open, not closed and scripted according to some 'grand narrative.'

Again, we find echoes of this emphasis on the conjunctural, on the contingent, in the 'political economy' wing. One of Marx's major achievements, we should recall, was an understanding of the centrality of exploitation to capitalist forms of development, and to the chronic, necessary, character of that exploitation; a relation without which capital would cease to exist. Exploitation was located in the workplace, but the relations of production which necessitated that also led to the commodification of the living place and to the extension of exploitative practices there, as people like Harvey have shown: again, not as a contingent matter, but as chronic, everyday, features of a particular mode of production. For critical human geographers of the 'political economy' persuasion, however, exploitation is something else. Instead of being a necessary feature of capitalism it occurs in particular places, at particular times, depending on circumstances. So-called 'globalization' and subsequent worker givebacks, the extraction of favorable terms by corporations from local governments as the price of locating there have accordingly generated a good deal of interest; the same applies to the institution of neo-liberal regimes and the deterioration in service, the increases in prices subsequent to privatization.

A third point of unity lies in a negative, and a crucial one at that. This is the disinterest in production. 'Political economy', true to its neo-smithian affinities, is fixated on the circulation of values, while their production is ignored. It is there, for example, in the market, more specifically in the labor market, that exploitation supposedly occurs: in the wage bargain struck by capitalist and worker and not in the workplace. As a result exploitation can be the conjunctural feature which it evidently is for the practitioners of 'political economy' who endlessly tear their hair out over the injustices of globalization or neo-liberalism or of the post-industrial city and who should instead be breaching the metaphoric barriers which say 'No Admittance Except on Business.' Accordingly politics is one of redistribution via the state or of strengthening the bargaining power of the

worker – hence the lamentations for the collapse of fordism – though as I have shown elsewhere (2004) this does nothing to abolish exploitation.

The ‘culture’ group offers little improvement. Instead of the circulation of values that is at issue, it now seems to be the circulation of meanings. This is with a view to achieving a recognition that will allow, courtesy of the state, some redistribution of symbolic values or even some material redistribution, as in the case of affirmative action. Again, as with values, one would like to know something about the production of meanings, and the crucibles within which that formation occurs, the conditions for it, the incentive framework other, that is, than some universal will to power which conceals as much as it communicates.

### **The Case for Skepticism**

All this is clearly sharply at odds with historical geographical materialism. Rather the emphasis there is on production and its universalizing, totalizing effects. To refer back to the series of overlapping dualisms referred to earlier, it is now political economy which subordinates worlds of meaning to itself, the objective comes to structure the subjective and so on. However, and as we will see, the emphasis on production does not mean that distribution and particularity have no role to play in its understanding of the world. Rather these are subordinate moments of the developing – repeat ‘developing’ – social whole.

#### *The Role of Class*

Marx was quite clear on the utterly fundamental character of production. As he and Engels wrote in *The German Ideology*:

“... life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing, and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life.”  
(p.48)

For Marx, this was always and emphatically *social* production: production in and through others. To be sure, the division of labor and the role it played in the historical tendency towards the socialization of production was part of this. But in bringing about that socialization, in making necessary that all-round dependence of people in production, it was the so-called relations of production that were the key. Hitherto, and apart from primitive communism, these had always been class relations; people entered in relations of inequality so that an exploiting class could emerge opposite the immediate producers, whether these might be slaves, serfs or, under capitalism, wage workers. History had been the history of class societies; exploitation was an essential feature of social production and not, *pace* many in the ‘political economy’ school, a contingent matter.

Exploited classes reproduced exploiting classes through the surplus they yielded up. This was as true under capitalism as it was under pre-capitalist modes of production. Certainly under capital, and unlike previous modes, it might be possible for an immediate producer, through dint of self-sacrifice and perhaps that of family, to become a capitalist. But by returning to the workers wages equivalent to the value of their labor power and no more, the exploiters ensured the continued existence of that class on which their own reproduction depended.

The centrality of class in HGM is in contradistinction to the role that it plays in CHG. In the ‘political economy’ wing it seems more outcome than precondition, a result rather than a precondition for capitalist exploitation. Nothing happens in ‘political economy’ without competition; this is why I referred to it as neo-smithian, and in that regard it is no improvement over mainstream economics. Competition is supposedly what makes the capitalist world go round; exploitation is exceptional rather than a necessary feature of production. Yet instead, start with the class relation: the separation of immediate producers from the means of production and their subsequent susceptibility to exploitation by those with the money capital sufficient to reunite them with the means of production by hiring them for a wage and purchasing the means of production. So long as the dependence of immediate producer on capitalist is reproduced, exploitation can continue. But should the labor market turn against capital, for whatever reason, and it

surely will, if only as a result of the ongoing accumulation of capital and its continuing investment, then exploitation, and therefore profits, and the reproduction of the capitalist class is threatened. It is at this point that capitalists will attempt to restore profitability by (e.g.) replacing workers with machines or relocating production to cheap labor reserves. To the extent that some lag in this process, then competition will force them to go the same route or a functionally similar one. But it is the result that is important: unemployment is created, the worker's dependence on capital is restored, wages go down, the class relation is reproduced, and exploitation can continue. Globalization, neo-liberalism or whatever, this will surely happen, and must if capitalism is to be reproduced (Cox 2004). This does not mean that workers' standard of living may not increase. This is, however, in no way incompatible with continuing exploitation. In fact, it is only through the prospect of continuing exploitation, continually recreating the conditions for the ongoing dependence of the immediate producers that capital is willing to make the concessions that, as the historical record shows, it clearly has.

Yet if in the 'political economy' wing the central role of class is misunderstood, in the new cultural geography it struggles to get a hearing at all. Work on the politics of difference is instructive here. The talk is about race, gender, nation, 'the rule of experts' (Mitchell 2002), orientalism, but rarely is there any reference to class, either as an aspect of the politics of difference or as something that might be formative of it. Rather than a politics of production, the politics of difference is seen as one that has immediately to do with distribution, and in its conditions, its very constitution, to do with distribution. The emphasis is on practices of exclusion and the discursive construction of the Other as the basis for exclusion: exclusion from recognition / votes / governing / citizenship / jobs. Interpreted thus one can see why class cannot be an object of study in the politics of difference. If one accepts Marx's conception of class as defined by the relations of production, then the idea of exclusion on the basis of discursive construction doesn't ring true. Exclusion certainly is an aspect of capital's rule but only in the statistical sense. Upward mobility for individuals into the capitalist class is not only possible; it happens. But it cannot apply in the sense of the whole working class ascending into the capitalist class. If the class relation is to be reproduced upward mobility has to be the exceptional

case, and paying a wage that maintains the dependence of the working class is the way in which that is ensured.

Accordingly, any reference to class as a politics of difference has to be to class in a non-marxist sense. It works, for example, in the sense of stratification and the common division into lower, middle and upper classes and their various subdivisions. Exclusionary practices, whether residential or in terms of private schools in the British case, are commonly justified in terms of the middle class virtues of hard work and saving and, protecting the property which is the result of that hard work and saving, and of course, 'choice', even if it the right to choose, to paraphrase an well-known expression, the Ritz.<sup>5</sup> And this, of course, is entirely in accord with the idea of the politics of difference as a politics of distribution.

What I am going to argue, however, is that production, or more specifically the capitalist form of production, is an absolutely necessary precondition for this politics of difference as it is experienced in its racial, gender, ethnic, national and other varieties. Without it, it would not exist. This does not mean to say that capitalist production explains the particular forms the politics of difference assumes. It builds on ideas of difference in the world inherited from pre-capitalist modes. Notions of patriarchy are certainly older than capitalism but they have been mobilized for purposes of distributional advantage, particularly in the symbolic sphere, in ways that are quite *sui generis*.

The fact is, capitalist production sets up a world of greatly intensified social risk. For the immediate producer, these are the risks of the labor market; the risks, that is, of losing a job, having to take work at a lower rate of pay, of the loss of sense of self, the sense of failure in terms of the hegemonic bourgeois values that that entails. In addition there is the fact that the vast majority of workers are, necessarily, treated as replaceable parts, to be ordered, watched over, and managed and then replaced by another worker, by a machine; historically, a quite extraordinary situation. All this is structurally entailed.

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<sup>5</sup> In a related discussion, Constance Perin (1983) has identified the common stereotypes attaching to homeownership and renting which justify the hierarchical nature of residential zoning; how, in other words, owner occupied homes are allowed in areas zoned for apartments, but the reverse does not apply.

Capital *has* to reproduce an industrial reserve army if it is to reproduce itself as a class relation. It *has* to resist demands for wages and to treat workers as replaceable parts for the same reason, even as, at the same time it is stimulating new social needs that can only be satisfied through an increase in the real wage. It is precisely in this humus that the politics of difference takes root.

The virulent racism of the South African white working class is a case in point. For almost sixty years among mine workers, white miners were a privileged stratum. A major reason was the institution of job reservation. Simply put, the better, higher paying jobs in the mines were reserved for whites. This had not been something that the mine owners wanted. In the early twentieth century they had tried to replace white miners with Africans, who were willing to work for considerably less. The white miners' unions responded with, first, a discourse of Otherness – the childlike character of the African, his inability to carry out the more responsible positions in the mine, like handling explosives – and then with violence in the form of the Rand Revolt of 1922.

There are other features of interest here. Not least is the way in which the racial franchise was used to bring mining capital to heel. The Rand Revolt was put down by the government, which had sided with the mine owners. The white miners then used the racial franchise to return a government more friendly to their cause, and to legislate job reservation, not just in the mines, but more generally. This suggests another way in which the politics of difference makes contact with the world of capitalist production. As Harvey has shown, capital has strongly territorializing tendencies: it *has* to defend values in place against the maelstrom of flux that is capital's inconstant geography. But to do this in a democratic context, it needs, as Jessop has pointed out, a hegemonic project. Even though capital in South Africa had seen advantages in being color blind, henceforth it was clear that satisfying the racist positions of the South African working class would have to be part of capital's hegemonic project in the country.

*The Material and the Ideal*

So it would seem to me that the neglect of production in what has been written about the politics of difference amounts to a very serious oversight. There are other issues here as well. As Marx emphasized, production is sensuous engagement with the world. That in turn raises the whole issue of concepts and therefore of discourse in apprehending the world. And, of course, the fact that we can never have direct, unmediated access is a fundamental assumption – dare one say foundational? – for the new cultural geography. So much flows from it, including skepticism towards the truth, even the existence of the world outside discourse. But what one makes of that assumption, what one infers from it, should be in question. To be sure, one can acknowledge that our sensuous engagement is discourse *dependent*. We make use of concepts in our observations and understandings. We aren't able to count without fundamental arithmetic concepts. However, and in contrast to the position held by some in the 'culture' wing of CHG, it is emphatically *not* discourse determined. If it was, and as Sayer (1993) has pointed out, then we would never be surprised by anything, we would never have to revise our knowledge of the world and attribute new meanings to it.

The view of HGM is that there is indeed an independent material reality. Furthermore, and quite crucially, in dealing with it, we can't afford to make mistakes. Our material reproduction depends on practice. And while we can't practice without concepts, concepts that are typically inter-subjective and therefore discursive in character, that doesn't mean to say that there can't be contradiction between those concepts and our actual experience: something that would result in a change in discourse as we shared that knowledge with others.

This insight can shed further light on the politics of difference as a politics of distribution. Gender, race, national discourse, or whatever, are certainly empowering and disempowering, but as Sayer (1993) has pointed out, they can only do this to the degree that they demonstrate practical effects. People's susceptibility to discourse depends on their susceptibility to the opinion of others and hence on something that is given by the

material nature of people.<sup>6</sup> I would add to this that the susceptibility to discursive construction by others also depends on practical experiences. The early contacts between whites and Africans are instructive. Whites brought guns, traded guns for African products, including slaves. The gun in turn provided advantages in hunting and in warfare and then in trade. The Zulu kingdom expanded on the basis of the ivory trade, and the gun greatly facilitated the hunting down of elephants and rhinos. For Africans, the gun, much like the wheel, must have seemed a remarkable piece of equipment; an example of the white man's magic and tangible evidence of his superiority. What I am arguing here is that Africans had to be susceptible to racist discourse by dint of practice experience, by dint of their actual encounters with whites, for it to work.<sup>7</sup>

### *Totalization*

Finally in this section, I want to revisit the issue of totalization. For the 'political economy' people the rejection of totalization is only implicit. The sense that one gets from their writings of the relation between state and capital or the political and the economic is one of separate entities interacting in a contingent fashion. How, after all, could social justice be brought about on their terms if, as I believe, the state is an aspect of capital, a necessary part of its division of labor? For the 'culture' wing, however, the rejection of totalization, and without a slip of the tongue, is a central part of their credo. The new cultural geography as defining itself in significant part to totalizing discourses, grand narratives, of which, of course, HGM is a prime example. This explains the emphasis on local knowledge, context and particularity as opposed to the claims of general theory and universality. In short, the social world of the new cultural geographers is a highly fragmented one. So too is that the case for the 'political economy' group,

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the highly contrasting positions on display in the famous Chomsky / Foucault debate: <http://www.chomsky.info/debates/1971xxxx.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Consider also here the argument that has been made by Brenner and Ramas (1984), that the gender divide between home and factory in the nineteenth century made sense for the working class family and the challenges that it faced. Relatively large families meant that husband and wife could look forward to an improved standard of living as children started entering waged employment. Factory work and the dangers of miscarriage, however, impeded achieving that goal, as did the difficulties of feeding young children subsequent to birth. So to what extent did gender discourse indeed make a sort of sense light of practical experience?

though it is something to be taken for granted rather than something against which they define themselves.

And to be sure this is our experience of the world. We do indeed experience it as fragmented, broken into different things, relations, processes, which are independent of each other and which interact in contingent fashion. As Alex Callinicos has remarked, the problem for us “... is that of understanding a social world which presents itself – in the mass media, for example, and bourgeois social science – as a chaotic collection of fragments.” (1998). Nevertheless, and despite this sense of separateness of parts, of contingent relations rather than necessary ones, social coherence *is* asserted, a form of social discipline or order enforced, only to be upset by the re-emergence of contradictions and subsequent processes of change that once more elicit countervailing forces. We get glimpses of this through our disciplinary spectacles – tendencies towards equilibrium in particular, but always tendencies that are constantly disrupted and which always coexist with longer term changes enforcing adaptations of various sorts: the changing sectoral composition of the economy, the multiplication of state functions, the universalization of individual rights, or at least a particular version of them, the intensification of the detail division of labor, the creation of new household forms, the increasing imbrication of industrial and finance capital, shifts in industrial organization towards a greater preponderance of multi-locational forms, and so on.

Social coherence is challenged but always reconstructed, sometimes slowly, sometimes more dramatically, as at times of crisis when huge overhangs in state finances are corrected, speculative excess punished by bankruptcies, and savage devaluations and the pretensions of labor disciplined by mass unemployment so that real wages come down to a level at which accumulation can once again proceed. This is a disciplining, an enforcement of some sort of social cohesion, that, by and large, goes on behind the backs of agents, that works through discursive convergence in the media and among public officials, via the formation of new forms of cooperation and their dissolution, through the negotiation of social settlements, sometimes explicit, sometimes less so, between the

forces of resistance and counter-resistance and, of course, through signals sent by markets.

At the center of this process, of course, is production. As Marx and Engels wrote:

“This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production.” (1978, p.42)

This was a conclusion arrived at through observation of the course of human history. This was a history of development in more than one sense: the development of the productive forces, the development of social needs, of the universal appropriation of the world. What had brought this about in Marx’s view was an increasing socialization of production, as exemplified by the development of the division of labor and means of exchange, a development brought about by the continual posing and suspending of contradictions. This socialization of production, however, this intensifying interdependence of all people, something greatly stimulated through capitalism, has been accompanied by a seeming fragmentation of social life, a splitting off of the different moments of the social process so that they appear to enjoy an independent existence with respect to each other. This is expressed among other ways in institutional forms: the seeming separation of state from economy from culture, of education from the labor process, society from space, and so on. But power, modes of cooperation, imaginaries, technologies, institutions, are all conditions for production and are conditioned in their forms and functions through the demands of production, even if it is production for some rather than for everybody.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This does not necessarily mean a descent into functionalism. As Marx and Engels argued in the *German Ideology*, “The fact is, therefore, that definite individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into those definite social and political relations. *Empirical observation must in each separate instance bring out empirically*, and without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production.” (p.46, my emphasis). The work of the Marxist historian E P Thompson is exemplary in this regard. See in particular his (1967) paper on time, work discipline and industrial capitalism.

Yet just because there has been development, something revealed with startling clarity under capital, just because the fragmentation of the world is a surface appearance of a deeper reality of struggles of which production is an essential precondition, doesn't mean to say that we can predict the future, that the future is closed. In a certain qualified sense, it is indeed open. The standard criticisms of historical geographical materialism as a totalizing understanding of the world, as economic determinism, structuralism, ignoring the role of agency, have to be rejected. Just because there are general social tendencies, which both limit and facilitate in certain directions, does not mean that we can anticipate the concrete trajectory of capital: the rise of particular sectors of production, the details of historico-geographical change, the emergence of new institutional and cultural forms. In thinking about this, it is useful to return to Massey's arguments about space and space-time.

Massey makes an argument about the essential openness of the future, a future defined not just in terms of time but in terms of space as well; as, in fact, space-time. Space-time are implicated in the production of this unpredictability through the chance juxtapositions of conditions, influences from elsewhere, in particular places. These particular comings together at particular junctures in space-time are pregnant with implications for change; for acts of creativity and the formation of new cultural, institutional and political forms, for example, which can then spread elsewhere to be transformed in virtue of the particular juxtapositions found *there*.

Undoubtedly this provides very considerable purchase on understanding the world and the form assumed by the ever changing concrete. It is also, however, an understanding that is heavy on the side of possibility, the enabling features of chance juxtapositions. Less clear in her account are the incentives people have, the necessities, even compulsions, they feel to develop these new forms; necessities that, I would argue, go back ultimately to those of social production and, as far as capital is concerned, the accumulation process. In other words: Change, innovation occurs for a reason and reasons have to do with the reproduction of the dominant social relations of production, or, to be sure, resistance to them. There is indeed particularity, but there are also

universal tendencies to which they are subordinated. The ever increasing socialization of production – indeed socio-*spatialization* of production – has to assume a concrete form, as do modes of resistance, the branches of production through which the expansion of social needs occurs, the territorial politics through which capital defends its bases in particular places. And there is no reciprocity here; the particular merely gives form to the universal and doesn't change it in its essential qualities, its essential self-transforming qualities.

### **And Back to Historical Geographical Materialism**

In my closing remarks I want to say a few things regarding various ways in which HGM has actually benefited from these challenges. I also want to make clear that there are some ways in which what has come out of CHG is so much babble that can safely be ignored. I think that this is particularly the case with the 'political economy' wing. That is not the case, however, with the new cultural geography.

In the first place, the role of the cultural in the social process has received reinforcement. It was always present in the Marxist corpus, famously in the case of some historians like E P Thompson and Christopher Hill. Nor should we forget the contributions of Marxist literary scholars like Arnold Kettle. And what is ideology about if it isn't, among other things, about meaning and the role of meaning; though *pace* the new cultural geography, meanings that are forged in the fires of actual material practice. Even so, the challenge of the new cultural geography has led to a more concerted interrogation of meanings as essential moments of the social process among Marxists.

Second, the new social movements do need to be understood. They are too important to be overlooked. As I have pointed out, I don't think there are any fundamental obstacles to making sense of them in terms of the categories of historical geographical materialism. But in doing that, we have to get class right. It is not a distributional category, so the interpretations of the 'political economy' people just won't suffice. Again, one can

exaggerate the degree to which identity politics has *not* been an object of Marxist interrogation. Recent contributions to the literature on the nation as an object of identity provide cases in point (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm 1990), as does the work on race of people like David Roediger. Still, an adequate retort to CHG requires renewed effort, particularly with respect to gender, it seems to me.<sup>9</sup>

Third and finally, there has been some tendency in HGM to overemphasize the compulsions of social production. I am not arguing here that HGM is, *per necessita*, and as indeed many in CHG would argue, determinist, economic and so on. But for whatever reason, the role of the creative intervention, of possibility rather than limits, often gets sidelined. I think that Harvey's work on territory and its necessary conditions in capitalist development as a *socio-spatial* process is inspired. Among other things, it resolved the problems that Marxist geography had in dealing with space in the 'seventies. But in an important sense, Massey's recent (2005) intervention is a useful counterpart. As I indicated above, she emphasizes the role of the chance juxtaposition of conditions and influences from elsewhere in creating new possibilities within particular places. What is missing from her account, however, is why agents in particular places would want to make something out of those possibilities. Harvey's account helps us understand just what that incentive framework is. Emphatically, however, I am not talking about another 'independent variable' that has to be included in Marxism. It has always been there. To paraphrase Marx: 'people make history, but not under conditions of their own choosing.'

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<sup>9</sup> Though again, there are already some useful contributions as in Cynthia Cockburn's *Brothers* (1983).

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