The Detour of Critical Theory

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Introduction

As he enters his 70th year, one might expect David Harvey’s writings to peter out in exiguous fragments and glosses. Yet he continues to shout his heresies with relentless erudition, having lost none of the vigour and verve that marked his turn towards ‘revolutionary theory’ some three decades ago. *The New Imperialism* (2003b) is one of several recent publications that demonstrate his determination to keep the flame of Marxist scholarship alive in the current conjuncture. These writings crown a canon of commanding weight. Even the most gifted thinker would be pleased to pen one or two germinal texts in a lifetime. That Harvey has written several – including many now-classic papers and essays – speaks to his prodigious talents and immense intellectual energy. The architectural sweep and grandeur of his intellectual edifice knows few equivalents within contemporary Marxism, and certainly none within his home discipline of geography. Equally, Harvey’s contribution to the field of urban studies has been paradigmatic: his writings on the city helped pioneer the search for holistic theory among analysts whose inquiries had all too often been piecemeal and fragmented.

In short, for long-standing admirers of Harvey’s work what Perry Anderson (1980: 2) once said of E. P. Thompson’s corpus holds true: ‘The claim on our critical respect and gratitude . . . is one of formidable magnitude.’ Yet within the three intellectual communities mentioned above – those that Harvey has most obviously influenced – his work has received no systematic evaluation. One more often finds scattered appropriations and evaluations of ideas contained in his various books and essays than an overall assessment of his intellectual and political project this last thirty years.¹ It is,
perhaps, a sign of how overdue a synoptic appreciation of Harvey’s work is that the present book be published at a time when everything that he stands for appears to many to be congenitally defective or simply passé. Here the line separating eulogy and elegy is very fine indeed. Even if Marxism – a discursive tradition to which Harvey has so richly contributed – were still dominant within left intellectual circles, any evaluation of his achievements would inevitably be tinged with a certain sadness. After all, as he enters his eighth decade, an assessment of his career must proceed in the certain knowledge that he has more days behind him than ahead of him. But the fact of Marxism’s eclipse within those many disciplines where it was once the pre-eminent critical paradigm (human geography included) lends the timing of this book an added poignancy.

Harvey is above all else a Marxist – more than any other label this one cuts to the marrow of his thinking. He belongs to a cohort of highly talented scholars who made Marxism a living force in the Anglophone academic world from the early seventies onwards. Prior to the remarkable efforts of this generation, only a few Anglophone Marxists had paved the way – figures such as Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm and Raymond Williams. As they reach the end of their careers, the intellectual legacy of Marxists like Harvey is by no means secure. True, their influence lives on in the work of their former graduate students and those acolytes educated during the eighties, when Marxism was de rigeur for aspiring leftists in the social sciences and humanities. But today the long-term survival of the ideas that Harvey and his fellow-travellers have professed is in question. Those Leftists who passed through bachelors programmes and graduate school from the early nineties were inculcated into ways of thinking which, in the main, defined themselves as post- or non-Marxist. In Harvey’s case, once the careers of his former supervisees (like Neil Smith) come to an end, my own generation of Marxist scholars – already a minority in geography, as in most of the human sciences – will be the only ones left to keep the ideas Harvey has so brilliantly expounded alive.

These comments notwithstanding, it is not my intention to post Harvey’s obituary notice or read him his last rites. I do, however, want to offer some sober reflections on what he’s achieved in his three decade journey from being ‘a Marxist of sorts’ in Social Justice to being what he is today: among the most feted living Marxists (and certainly the most famous living geographer) operating in an intellectual environment where his ideas are no longer at the cutting edge of leftist thinking. I here use the word ‘achieve’ in a very practical sense. In one of his most famous theses, Marx made much of the two-way relationship between understanding and change. Harvey’s oeuvre, it seems to me, expresses its author’s overwhelming desire to
explain and to diagnose. But it is much less clear how this quest for under-
standing can translate into informed anti-capitalist struggle.

Specifically, I want to answer the following question in this chapter: in
what senses, and with what consequences, has Harvey been a critical theor-
ist of capitalist society this last thirty years or so? Both the italicized terms
are significant. Though anyone familiar with Harvey’s work would agree
that it’s ‘critical’, few have troubled to inquire into the meaning of this
appellation when applied to his restatement and extension of Marx’s think-
ing. Likewise, though the commitment to it runs like a red thread through
virtually all of Harvey’s publications, it is not at all obvious why theory
should be the privileged vehicle of critique – especially when its author has
made few extended comments on the matter. Yet it seems to me that an
understanding of what connects critique and theory is essential if we are to
grasp what Harvey’s years of thinking, speaking and writing as a Marxist
ultimately amount to. If the point is to change the world, then what contri-
bution to this endeavour has Harvey’s prodigious theoretical output made?

I realize, of course, that in one sense this question is both unfair and
unanswerable. It is unfair because the ideas of one person – however revela-
tory they may be – can only do so much in a world as large and complex as
our own. And it is unanswerable, in the abstract at least, because only an
empirical analysis of who has heard or read Harvey, and with what effects,
can ultimately tell us how influential he has been. In short, the impacts of
Harvey’s Marxism have been (and remain) radically underdetermined by
the content of his writings and many speaking engagements. Whither his
ideas have travelled and with what consequences is a contingent question.
However, the content of these ideas clearly does matter, as do the various
media that he has chosen to propagate them in. In what follows, I thus want
to take an overview of Harvey’s writings as a theorist, asking what makes
them ‘critical’, while also scrutinizing his preferred vehicles for disseminat-
ing these ideas.

I begin with some comments on the ‘theoretical imperative’ that per-
vades virtually all of Harvey’s writings as a Marxist, whatever his particular
subject of inquiry (cities, space, culture, finance, etc.). The detour to which
my title refers is a cognitive one: for Harvey has long insisted that progres-
sive change can only result from proper understanding and, for him, such
understanding is furnished by theory. His project has been to abstract from
one kind of complexity – that of everyday life in a capitalist world – in order
to make plain another that should, in his view, be the real object of what-
ever transformatory agency can be brought to bear at any given moment in
history: namely, the underlying complexity of those relations, tendencies and
processes that appear as something other than themselves. The following
three sections examine what I see as the principal dimensions of the ‘work’ that Harvey’s theoretical animadversions aim to do. These concern (i) the supposedly ‘organic’ connection – internal to theory – between explanation and evaluation of Harvey’s object, capitalist society; (ii) the identification of subjects or agents who are actually or potentially capable of effecting significant societal change; and (iii) the capacity of academic discourse – Harvey’s stock-in-trade – to tap into wider currents of social discontent and insurgency. I conclude, perhaps ungenerously, that Harvey’s work can be found wanting in all three areas. Its critical edge, when examined closely, appears blunt. For those, like myself, who have been deeply inspired and influenced by Harvey the challenge is clear. If the embers of Marxism are to be kept aglow in the years ahead, the powerful diagnostic impulses represented by his work need strenuously to be maintained. But its normative dimensions will need particular attention if change is to follow meaningfully from analysis. After all, Marxism, in all its baroque permutations, has always suffered an imbalance between its explanatory and practical dimensions since the days of Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg. The lacunae in Harvey’s work only serve to demonstrate how enduring this imbalance is.

**Theory Matters**

‘By our theories you shall know us’ was the stirring and, as it turned out, premonitory conclusion to David Harvey’s first book (1969a: 489) – one published before the Damascene conversion recorded in the thrillingly schizoid pages of Social Justice. Personalized, it could stand as the epigram for virtually all Harvey’s writings as a Marxist. Aside from one ostensibly empirical contribution (the Paris chapters of Consciousness and the Urban Experience (1985a) and a more philosophically inclined treatise (Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference (1996)), the bulk of his publications comprise a quest to fashion a ‘cognitive map’ or ‘encompassing vision’ that can help us see the political economic logics that underpin seemingly disparate aspects of contemporary life (1989b: 2, 4). In metaphorical terms, if Harvey is a commando of the word, then theory is his most potent weapon.

As such, Harvey’s Marxism is neither forbiddingly abstract nor cloyingly concrete. Typically, his theoretical elucidations are specific enough to capture those invariant processes, relations and tendencies that give capitalism its structured coherence and dynamic instability. In this he emulates the late Marx, and intentionally so: from The Limits to Capital through his two ‘Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization’ to The
Condition of Postmodernity and his new book on imperialism, Harvey has adumbrated a classical version of Marxism. Drawing upon Capital, the Grundrisse and Theories of Surplus Value, he has taken Marx at his word and his work ‘without too much assistance from elsewhere’ (2000a: 82). The result is a corpus that both explicates the logic of capitalism in general while linking it to the conjunctural particulars of the postwar political economy. As those familiar with his theoretical writings know, Harvey has a knack of leavening what is essentially a general theory of the capitalist mode of production with present-day evidence, anecdote and observation. This gives his theoretical texts a grounded feel, even though he rarely subjects his conceptual claims to extensive empirical scrutiny. Rather as Marx fleshed out volume 1 of Capital with observations on working-class life in Victorian England, so Harvey breathes life into his conceptual compages through suggestive factual material and illustrative asides.

He is not, of course, the only contemporary Marxist to read Marx directly, rather than through lenses provided by the latter’s many distinguished epigones (like Althusser). In fact, he is one of a fairly sizeable cohort of scholars who have little time for the several postclassical Marxisms that have exerted an influence in the Anglophone academy – including, most recently, analytical Marxism and the ‘overdeterminist’ Marxism championed by Resnick and Wolff. But among classical Marxists today Harvey’s theoretical contributions have, I think, been doubly distinctive. For not only has he extended Marx’s political economy into topical regions few others have explored – like built environments of production, distribution and consumption. He has also made singular contributions to our understanding of a phenomenally wide range of issues – wider, even, than those of a polymathic contemporary like Fredric Jameson.

In all this, there is a consistency and seriousness in Harvey’s theoretical work that is profoundly impressive. His characteristic manoeuvre has been to proceed from his peerless grasp of expanded capital reproduction (laid out in The Limits to Capital) and from there ‘deepen and sharpen [Marxian] theory so that it can reach into realms that have hitherto remained opaque’ (1989a: 16). This organic extension of Marx’s later writings has involved many ‘intuitive jumps . . . and speculative leaps’ (1999a: xxii). For Harvey is far more than an accomplished imitator of his master’s voice. In Dick Walker’s (2004: 434) apt words, while Harvey’s theorizing possesses ‘a degree of fidelity to the original spirit and letter of Marx that is quite remarkable [it] is not an epiphany that rewrites the word according to Saul along the road to a New Church, but a judicious rendering and extension of Marx’s unfinished project’. Harvey has said much the same. ‘I much prefer’, he writes, ‘to treat [Marx’s] . . . statements as . . . suggestions and
rough ideas that need to be consolidated into a more consistent theor[y] . . . that respects the spirit rather than the verbal niceties if his largely unpub-
lished studies, notes and letters’ (Harvey 2001a: ix).

**Representing and intervening**

Why does Harvey place such emphasis on (Marxist) theory over and above any of the other products of intellectual labour? To answer this question we need to understand his conception of knowledge in general. Since *Social Justice* Harvey has held fast to an ‘activist’ view of knowledge. This has a double aspect. It means first that knowledge is no mere ‘reflection’ of a material world that imprints itself unproblematically on the human mind. Rather, for Harvey knowledge is a social construction that has a relative autonomy from the realities it depicts. As such, Harvey sees all knowledge as in the service of particular constituencies with particular interests by virtue of their social location. This was evident in his early critiques of neo-Malthusian reasoning – where all knowledge was considered to be ‘ideological’ – and of public policy discourse (Harvey 1974a, 1974d); a decade ago, it was the theme of his pointed discussion of ‘globalization talk’ (1996b); and, more recently, his essay on ‘cartographic knowledges’ strongly accents the non-innocence of all geographical imaginations (2001a: ch. 11). But if Harvey (Havey and Scott 1988: 215) sees ‘the production of knowledge as a political project irreversibly implicated in the organizing of power relations’, he also sees it as a basis for resistance. For him, Marxism’s special quality as a body of insurgent knowledge is that it is a critique of capitalism rather than of those other systems of social domination with which it intersects. More particularly, I think Neil Smith (1995: 506) is right that Harvey early conceived of his work ‘as a form of situated knowledge from the perspective of the working class’. This is clear as far back as *Social Justice* (1973a: 127), where he declared that Marxism ‘provides the key to understanding capitalis[m] . . . from the position of those not in control of the means of production’. (I want to return to this claim later in the chapter.)

If, then, Harvey sees knowledge as a situationally varied construct he also sees it as a ‘material force’ in much the way that Marx imagined it to be. For him, all forms of knowledge – particularly those that are hegemonic – enter fully into the constitution of the world they describe, explain or evaluate. Indeed, if he did not believe this he would hardly have spent his career since *Explanation in Geography* (1969a) consciously promulgating Marxism, a body of knowledge that gained purchase in the Anglophone academy precisely through the efforts of Harvey and his generation of historical materialists. As he put it in *Consciousness and the Urban Expe-
rience: ‘the struggle to make Marxian concepts both plain and hegemonic . . . [is] as important . . . as active engagement on the barricades. That is why Marx wrote Capital. And that is why I can write these words’ (Harvey 1985a: xii). This notion that knowledge intervenes rather than merely represents, recalls Marx’s oft-cited final thesis on Feuerbach once more. But that thesis should not be understood too one-sidedly. Commenting on it, Martin Heidegger (1971: 35) maintained that ‘changing the world presupposes changing the representation of the world, and a representation of the world can only be obtained when one has sufficiently interpreted it’. Harvey apparently shares the sentiment: ‘in order to change the world’, he also wrote in Consciousness, ‘. . . we [first] have to understand it’ (1985a: xii). In this light, his voluminous writings as a Marxist can be seen as underpinned by an anxiety: an anxiety that, without proper cognition, actions to change the world for the better will go awry.

In sum, Harvey’s view of knowledge is activist in the double sense that knowledge is seen as both constructed and consequential. What he said in Social Justice has, I think, formed a memorable template for his subsequent work: ‘It is irrelevant to ask whether concepts, categories and relationships are “true” or “false”. We have to ask, rather, what it is that produces them and what they serve to produce’ (Harvey 1973a: 298). This two-sided conception of knowledge feeds directly into Harvey’s understanding of the ‘power’ of theory. I noted above that Harvey’s publications as a Marxist have, for the most part, been neither philosophical nor empirical in focus – notwithstanding some contributions in both areas. ‘As a Marxist’, he declared in The Urbanization of Capital, ‘I am overtly rather than subliminally concerned with rigorous theory building’ (Harvey 1985b: xiii). The Limits to Capital had already testified to this fact, with its three-cut account of the capitalist mode of production, and texts like The Condition of Postmodernity have subsequently demonstrated Harvey’s firm predilection for theoretical discourse (albeit in a more essayistic mode than The Limits). It may seem odd that in a world suffering so many frighteningly concrete problems, Harvey continues to insist on ‘more rather than less attention to theory construction’ (1989a: 15) – odd because theorizing is often thought to be an ethereal pursuit rather removed from the grim realities (and joys) of everyday life. Yet for Harvey this is anything but the case. So why, in his view, can something called ‘theory’ make good on his aspirations both to understand and to change the world?
The second part of this question – which speaks to the normative and practical dimensions of theory (my main concern in this chapter) – I’ll defer answering until the third, fourth and fifth sections. For now, it is sufficient (and much easier) to construct an answer to the first part – which speaks to the explanatory-diagnostic dimensions of theory. This can be done by scrutinizing Harvey’s scattered comments on theory and theorizing. These comments have been made, for the most part, in the introductions, prefaces and afterwords of his many books. Studied closely, they indicate that theory possesses three key characteristics in Harvey’s estimation. These characteristics mark both its specificity and its importance, distinguishing it from the other possible fruits of intellectual labour.

First, and most obviously, theory allows us to see the wood for the trees in Harvey’s opinion. Marx once famously described social reality as ‘the unity of the diverse’ and noted that analysts have only the ‘power of abstraction’ on hand in order to make that reality intelligible. Harvey feels much the same. Theory, he insisted in his most conceptually muscular book (The Limits), will not ‘procure a full understanding of singular events . . . The aim, rather, is . . . to grasp the most significant relationships at work’ (1982a: 450). This calls to mind Andrew Sayer’s (1995: 5–6) lucid definition of theory as a set of connected abstractions that ‘cut into the connective tissue of the world at different angles . . . spotlight[ing] certain objects while plunging others into darkness’. In short, one of theory’s key attributes for Harvey is that it allows us to detect the signals in the noise.

Secondly, Harvey values theoretical labour because it makes visible that which is unseen. Like Marx’s later works, Harvey’s are peppered with references to ‘surface appearances’ and ‘underlying realities’ – most recently in The New Imperialism. This reflects his conviction that capitalism makes itself apparent by, as it were, hiding itself. The key relations, tendencies and processes that make capitalism dance a dialectical tune are, Harvey insists, compelled to appear as something other than themselves. This means that they are invisibly real and really invisible. The only way they can be understood, then, is cognitively not phenomenally or perceptually. As Harvey argued in the introduction to The Urban Experience – one of his most forthright statements on the matter – theory is a ‘way of seeing’ in precisely the former sense. It involves going beyond the actual in order to fathom that which is virtual. In light of this, it is no surprise that the cognitive insights provided by theory are very ‘hard-won’ (Harvey and Scott 1989f: 224) in Harvey’s view. There is no royal road to understanding, but Harvey is adamant that theory can make our journey down that road a good deal
easier by deciphering fugitive impressions and disputing ‘common sense’ empiricism.

Thirdly, and finally, Harvey values theory for its capacity to identify the commonalities that masquerade in and as differences. The commonalities that concern him are, of course, those of capital reproduction and expansion. The differences that concern him are, to posit an overdrawn distinction, those ‘internal’ and ‘external’ to capitalism – principally differences of geography (place and region), of individual and group identity (class, ‘race’, gender, etc.) and of social structure (culture, politics, etc.).

In reviews of both The Condition of Postmodernity (e.g. Deutsche 1991) and Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference (e.g. Braun 1998), Harvey has been accused of reducing difference to commonality and indicted for his ‘meta-theoretical’ impulses (i.e. supposed cognitive exorbitancy). I don’t propose to assess these linked charges here. Suffice to say that in Harvey’s view the messenger is here being blamed for the message. If capitalism is an economic system that penetrates every nook and cranny of contemporary life, then any theory of it must necessarily be totalizing and holistic. This, at least, is Harvey’s take on things – one articulated forcefully in a co-authored essay with Allen Scott (1988), in a response to feminist critics of The Condition (Harvey 1992b), and in a rejoinder to a trio of commentaries on Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference (Harvey 1998a). If this view is defensible then the necessity for a ‘way of seeing’ that can identify what conjoins otherwise different and disparate aspects of daily existence becomes clear. This way of seeing shows capitalism not to be an ‘economic system’ narrowly defined but, rather, a ‘way of life’ that pushes beyond all geographical and social boundaries. If capitalism’s hidden hand appears, at first sight, not to be at work in and on all manner of putatively ‘non-capitalist’ forms of difference then this is only because of what I noted above: namely, that it manifests itself in duplicitous ways that it is the job of Marxist theory to expose.

To summarize, the explanatory-diagnostic power of theory appears to be threefold if we attend to Harvey’s comments on the matter. It helps us discern (i) order in apparent confusion, (ii) underlying realities that are hidden from view, and (iii) the ties that bind the apparently dissociated. ‘An object’, Louis Althusser (1970: 184) once said, ‘cannot be defined by its immediately visible or sensuous appearance; it is necessary to make a detour via its concept in order to grasp it’. In all three of the ways identified above, this comment captures well the ‘theoretical imperative’ (Harvey and Scott 1989f: 223) of Harvey’s Marxism. For him the detour of theory is necessary if we are to get to our destination: namely, a rigorous understanding of capitalism in all its creative destructiveness and crafty promiscuity. It
is precisely because theory is about a world that is unable to reveal its fundamental character without a major effort of intellectual labour that it is so indispensable and so important for Harvey.

**A critical theorist?**

None of this is unconnected to critique, of course. If it were, then Harvey’s numerous theoretical interventions would be most un-Marxist – little more than a positive science devoid of any evaluative force or practical consequence. As Max Horkheimer (1972 [1937]) argued in a now classic statement, the exemplary promise of ‘critical’ as opposed to what he called ‘traditional’ theory is that it combines explanation and evaluation without recourse to anything outside its object of analysis. This organic link between the is and the ought is one that Harvey has both recognized and celebrated since his turn to Marxism thirty years ago. In *Social Justice*, for example, he declared that ‘the act of observing is the act of evaluation’ and made a famous distinction between ‘revolutionary’, ‘counter-revolutionary’ and ‘status quo’ theory, arguing that the former holds out the prospect for creating truth rather than [merely] finding it (1973a: 15, 151). Almost a decade later, in *The Limits*, he made an equally forthright declaration about the ‘unity of rigorous science and politics’ that characterized his own and Marx’s theorization of capitalism (Harvey 1982a: 37). And more recently he has invoked the figure of the ‘insurgent architect’ to describe his intellectual endeavours as a whole (Harvey 2000a). In short, Harvey has consistently maintained that the act of depicting the fundamental attributes of capitalist society – which is what theory, in its three above-mentioned dimensions, aims to do – is, *ipso facto*, an act of judging them.

This said, Harvey (like Marx before him) has rarely gone beyond terse or suggestive statements about why explanation *is* critique. Nor has he really established why the intimate link between cognition and judgement is, apparently, so important. Nor, finally, has he reflected much in print on the problems of burdening theory and the theorist with so great a responsibility – that of being both explainer and evaluator. In the rest of this chapter I want to tackle these issues and, in so doing, answer the simple question posed in my introduction. In what specific ways, and with what consequences, has David Harvey been a critical theorist as opposed to a putatively ‘uncritical’ one?
The answer to the first part of this question, might, at first sight, appear rather straightforward. Harvey’s work is littered with judgements about the ills of capitalism’s geographies and ecologies. What’s more, he has codified many of these claims into full-blooded normative arguments – for instance, about justice (as in *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*) and rights (as in *Spaces of Hope*). So presumably one need only look closely at Harvey’s formalized criticisms to understand the link between his rich theorization of how capitalism works and what’s wrong with it. But things are not, I think, so straightforward.

In the first place, it’s striking that these formalized judgements mostly occur in books and essays that are either philosophical in tenor or where Harvey says little of a substantive theoretical nature about capitalist society. For instance, his well-known retort to the ‘postmodern death of justice’ involved drawing on Iris Young’s (1990) multi-dimensional concept of (in)justice and illustrating its utility by way of a vignette about Hamlet, North Carolina (Harvey 1996a: ch. 12). Secondly, and conversely, where Harvey offers detailed theoretical insights into the dynamics of capitalism – as in *The Limits* – his animadversions are neither codified nor formally justified. Rather, they are thrown out at the reader as if their validity is more-or-less self-evident. If we periodize this, we might say, at the obvious risk of oversimplification, that (i) after *Social Justice* Harvey spent twenty years explaining how capitalism works – yet without formally articulating the grounds for his many critical asides, while (ii) devoting many of the works between *The Condition of Postmodernity* and *Spaces of Capital* to formally evaluating capitalism’s ills – yet without linking evaluation tightly to a substantive analysis of its object.

It may well be that this link can be made convincingly with a little intellectual effort on our part. But I’d offer another interpretation of this apparent disjuncture between Harvey’s formal exercises in explanatory and normative argumentation. Marx, on several occasions, made much of the difference between critique and criticism. The former, as we know, has a strong claim to be the favoured and, as it were, official self-description of his work. The latter, he once observed acerbically, ‘knows [only] how to . . . condemn the present, but not how to comprehend it’ (Marx 1976: 361). Critique, then, was for Marx an act ‘not of judging the present but of disclosing its potentiality, of making manifest what is latent and bringing to the surface what is active only in a subterranean way’ (McCarney 1990: 109). Critique thus relies on the autocritical nature of its object (in this case capitalism) to do the work that critics must do by bringing extraneous values to bear. It
circumvents what Perry Anderson (1980: 86) once called ‘the vain intrusion of moral judgements in lieu of causal understanding . . . leading to an “inflation” of ethical terms’.

I’ll explain the relevance of this critique–criticism distinction to Harvey’s work presently. But let me first trace its general consequences for analysis and evaluation. Critique is meaningless unless the phenomena being analysed are pregnant with possibilities and potentialities that, if realized, would address existing maladies. Criticism, meanwhile, while lacking the immanence of critique, can none the less serve a useful function in situations where the room for progressive change is limited. Though Marx was generally dismissive of criticism, and though the Frankfurt School later declared both it and critique impotent in the face of what they saw as a totally administered society, this underestimates its potential utility. For instance, utopian schemes that may have little chance of coming to fruition can none the less usefully highlight the contingency and non-necessity of existing societal or environmental arrangements.

It seems to me that Harvey’s writings as a Marxist vacillate between critique and criticism. Rather than condemn him for inconsistency I think it’s more productive to understand why the equivocation has arisen in the first place and in what it consists. My sense is that Harvey turned to criticism at that point when he recognized that critique can only be compelling under certain highly restrictive conditions. Let me elaborate.

The attraction of critique, as Harvey recognized in the ‘socialist formulations’ of Social Justice, is that evaluation is located in the object of analysis (capitalism) rather than potentially arbitrary values imposed by the theorist. Yet the theorist still has an important role to play, of course, since it takes a major effort of intellectual labour to expose what is hidden and latent. Harvey realized soon after Social Justice that he understood neither Marx’s political economy nor, as a consequence, the complexities of capitalism well enough – something he ‘needed to straighten . . . out’ (Harvey 2000a: 82). His 1970s essays on capitalism, cities and space and The Limits to Capital were (and remain) rigorous attempts to ‘mirror’ in theory the dynamics that bind capitalism and its geographies together dialectically. They differ from the ‘liberal formulations’ of the first half of Social Justice not just in the obvious sense that they are Marxist in character. More than this, these writings are critical of capitalism yet without any of the formal normative argumentation used to attack intra-urban unevenness in Social Justice’s early chapters. While it may seem that Harvey simply put normative issues to one side after 1973, I’d suggest instead that his substantive theoretical work through the seventies and into the eighties took the form of critique. In other words, Harvey did not puff out his work with learned
discussions of equality or justice, or schemes to make these concepts flesh. Instead, in the very act of analysing capitalism he followed the later Marx in thereby evaluating it too.

This is clearly the case in *The Limits*, though it takes a skilled interpreter to see exactly how. More than any of Harvey’s books this one sticks close to the spirit and letter of Marx the political economist. Though it seems to be a rather austere dissection of capitalism’s temporalities and spatialities, it is also a non-moralistic indictment of this mode of production. Seyla Benhabib’s work is my guide here. In *Critique, Norm and Utopia*, (1986) Benhabib usefully outlined the specific ways in which *Capital* is a critique of political economy rather than an economics. Though I don’t have the space to justify the claim, I’d suggest that her elucidation of Marxian critique applies almost exactly to *The Limits*. This should be no surprise for the simple and obvious fact that *The Limits* is so deeply grounded in the arguments of *Capital*, as well as ancillary texts like the *Grundrisse*. Benhabib argues that *Capital* is a critique in the following ways. First, it is an *immanent critique* of capitalism because it shows how the values of this society – like equality – are abrogated in its very functioning. Secondly, it is a *defetishing critique* of capitalism because it shows that the system is not, in its fundamentals, what it appears to be on the surface. Finally, Benhabib shows that *Capital* is a *transformatory critique* of capitalism because it shows that system to be crisis-prone and self-negatory. All these elements of critique can readily be found in *The Limits* once one knows to look for them, most obviously in the third case (‘critique-as-crisis-theory’: Castree 1996).

If *The Limits* is Harvey’s most accomplished work of critique – rather than criticism tacked on to a notionally ‘neutral’ exposé of capitalism’s inner geo-temporal dynamics – then it arguably stands as an unrepeated precedent in Harvey’s oeuvre post-1989. In many of his writings after *The Condition of Postmodernity* Harvey (re)turned to normative questions with an explicitness not found in his work since *Social Justice*. With the major exception of *The New Imperialism*, this return was coincident with a move away from formal theory construction towards more philosophical, speculative and interpretive writings. Specifically, many of Harvey’s 1990s publications were an attempt to adumbrate principles suitable for an attack on capitalism, while recognizing that there’s more in the world to criticize than capitalism alone. These principles were intended to be both benchmarks for judging the present and standards that might mobilize broad-based opposition to capitalism at a time when leftists have many targets to consider – such as gender inequality, homophobia and environmental degradation, for example. In addition to laying out these principles with a formality not seen in his work for twenty years, Harvey ended the
nineties with a fictional depiction of a postcapitalist society barely incipient in the present – thus contributing to a long and honourable tradition of left utopian thinking (Harvey 2000: Appendix). Together, I’d suggest that these various normative interventions constitute a break with Marxian critique. While they are critical of capitalism, they are not, in my view, put forward with any rigorous reference to Harvey’s earlier theoretical studies of this mode of production. Rather, these studies hover in the background. In short, Harvey’s belief in the power of critique seems to have given way over the course of his career to a belief that ‘criticism’ is none the less a useful second best. In saying this, I realize that Harvey would probably reject this reading and insist that he has never once relinquished the weapon of critique.

Why has Harvey’s commitment to critique given way to a more explicit but less exacting form of evaluation as the years have gone by? I’d suggest two reasons, both of which are underpinned by the fact that as long as critique remains wedded to theory it cannot, despite its aspirations, lay any serious claim to realism! As Harvey’s various comments on theory over the years attest, he acknowledges that while it is indubitably about the world it is not, by definition, coterminous with it. The distinctiveness and value of theory is that its abstracts from reality in order to reveal key aspects of it. What this means is that while critique can be compelling at the theoretical level, it is found wanting when put to the test of conjunctural specifics. This has a ‘horizontal’ and a ‘vertical’ dimension. First, because Harvey has theorized capitalism in abstraction from other systems of social domination (like patriarchy), his critique of political economy necessarily assumes ‘non-interference’ from these other systems. Secondly, because Harvey has theorized capitalism in abstraction from any specific social formations – with the signal exception of the Paris essays in Consciousness and the Urban Experience – his critique of political economy has been equally ‘unadulterated’ by empirical complications. In other words, the limits of critique are those of theory itself.

Harvey, it seems to me, came to realize this by the late eighties, once he had worked through Marx’s ideas and created his own distinctive theoretical compages (what he called ‘historical-geographical materialism’). What that working through demonstrated – as The Limits so richly showed – was that Marx’s critique was indeed as ‘revolutionary’ as Harvey had claimed in 1973a: nothing less than a root-and-branch demonstration of capitalism’s internal contradictions and crisis tendencies. But after the major economic crisis of the early seventies that shook the Western world, it became all too plain that actually existing capitalism (as opposed to Harvey’s theory of capitalism in general) was adapting very well to its own torsions and ten-
sions. In the West, the end of the Keynesian welfare state era, the defeat of the labour movement and the successful installation of neoconservative ideas all indicated that the promise of critique would probably fall short when confronted with these contingent realities. It was surely not for nothing that Harvey, for a time, supplemented his abstract theorization of capitalism with Regulation School ideas (e.g. Harvey 1988a). For these meso-level abstractions helped explain precisely why capitalist societies contain the resources to prevent economic crises making flesh the postcapitalist future promised by critique.

If a resilient late twentieth-century capitalism thus drew some of the sting from Harvey’s critique of political economy, it was accompanied by a wider ‘crisis of Marxism’ within the Western academy and the rise of a more heterodox left. I won’t rehearse the reasons for this crisis, except to say that by the nineties it appeared to many still committed to Marxist ideas that capitalism was being let off the hook too lightly. As free market ideology was aggressively disseminated worldwide, we might conjecture that some Marxists felt it was pragmatically important to use any and all tools available to indict a globalizing capitalist system. This conjecture might well apply to Harvey who, as his essay ‘Postmodern morality plays’ (1992a) showed, was frustrated that the academic left was abandoning Marxism at the very moment when capitalism was entering a ‘competitive’ phase redolent of the time when Marx was writing. In this light, one might see his decision to discuss justice, difference and rights in quite general terms through the nineties the following terms. Not only was it a response to the intrinsic problems of critique. It was also an attempt to keep anticapitalist arguments alive in inhospitable circumstances where intellectual allies seemed to be diminishing in number.

To summarize this section, if one takes Harvey’s Marxist writings in their entirety, it seems to me that he has come to recognize the insufficiency of critique when confronted with changing real-world and intellectual circumstances. The detour of a theory of capitalism can, it seems, only get us so far in a context where the system’s ills and irrationalities are inextricably linked with all manner of non-capitalist repressions and struggles. Over three decades after the effusions of ‘Revolutionary and counter-revolutionary theory in geography’, Harvey remains a trenchant critic of capitalism but is now a more considered one. To the extent that capitalism does not exist in a ‘pure’ state, so Harvey’s critique has had to relinquish its rigour and reckon with a more overdetermined world where progressive change is inevitably ‘dilemmatic’.
A Rebel without a Subject?

If I’m correct that the ‘power’ of critique has been attenuated in Harvey’s work over time, I’d suggest that this has been coincident with an increasing inability to identify determinate agents capable of effecting meaningful anti-capitalist struggle. Clearly, this inability is problematic for a Marxism aiming to change the world rather than remain a sullen witness to its own impotence. It is this inability I want now to describe and explain.

In section two of this chapter, I noted that Harvey early regarded Marxism as a form of situated knowledge from the perspective of the working class. He reiterated this belief in an apologia for *The Condition of Postmodernity*, where he reminded his critics that wage-labourers were constituted as the prime ‘other’ of capitalist history (Harvey 1992b). Yet, despite these asseverations, I’d argue that Harvey recognized almost from the start of his turn to Marx that there is no such thing as a specific working-class actor at either the theoretical or ‘real-world’ (empirical) levels. This recognition was forced upon Harvey not by any failings in his work but by realities (to reuse my earlier distinction) both ‘internal’ and ‘external’ to capitalism.

The first signs of this are evident in a long footnote early on in *The Limits* and in the ‘Afterword’ to that book. *The Limits* is an analysis of what sociologists call ‘system (dis)integration’: it abstracts capitalism from its real-world integument and, from the third-person perspective of a thinker-observer (Harvey), explicates its logic. In a footnote on the Althusserian distinction between mode of production and social formation, Harvey (1982a: 26) acknowledges that the ‘neat two class analytics’ of *The Limits* are unrealistic. Similarly, in the book’s concluding pages he admits that an examination of the lived reality of working-class people ‘constitutes a fundamentally different point of departure’ in the analysis of how capitalism survives or is overthrown (1982a: 447). Even at the level of theory, I would argue that *The Limits* deconstructs its own seeming identification of a singular working-class actor exploited by a capitalist class. As I have argued elsewhere, the text depicts capitalism as an impersonal mode of domination as much as a system in which the exploitation of one class by another at the site of production is the fundamental issue (Castree 1999). Following Postone (1996), *The Limits* can be read not simply as a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of wage-labourers. Rather, it can be seen as exposing the peculiar fact that in a capitalist world *everyone* touched by the system is subject to a ‘quasi-objective form of social mediation’ (Postone 1996: 5) that extends well beyond the productive sphere. Here relations between individuals, regardless of who they are or what they do, confront
them as invisible forces (e.g. falling profit rates, economic crises) or visible things (commodities, built environments, etc.). Though *The Limits* does say a fair bit about class struggle, it devotes far more time and energy to tracing the various forms in which the products of wage-labour become seemingly foreign, uncontrollable factors standing over against people of all stripes. Indeed, as if to confirm this, Harvey’s appendix on value theory (Harvey 1982a: 35–8) stresses that Marx’s political economy is an exposé of ‘the concatenation of forces and constraints’ that serve to discipline people ‘as if they are externally imposed necessity’ (1982: 27). And in later works – like the essay on money, time and space in *Consciousness and the Urban Experience* (1985a: ch. 5) – this theme of domination by abstractions appears with equal clarity.

Even if I’m wrong here, it is clear that Harvey recognized in and after *The Limits* that part of the logic of capitalism is to fragment workers geographically and so tendentially undermine the possibility for the emergence of a wider class consciousness. Capitalism’s propensity to produce different cities and regions with a ‘structured coherence’ – so well explained in *The Urbanization of Capital* – confounds co-operative thought and action among spatially separated working class communities. It follows that there is no such thing as the working-class but only ever spatially dissonant, place-based class groupings – unless organizational apparatuses can create translocal forms of solidarity. It is also clear – particularly in *Consciousness* – that Harvey was at pains many years ago not to confuse the identification of an insurgent subject at the theoretical level with the realities of working-class agency at the empirical level. As the Paris essays of this book showed, even in moments of crisis a coherent working-class actor does not simply step into the breach. These essays – which are inquiries into what sociologists would call ‘social (dis)integration’ – make clear that working class people exist not as a collective singular constituency but as an empirically complex, disunified one. The mix of class fractions is always such that the abstract class analytics of a text like *The Limits* do not translate cleanly at the level of lived experience.

By the late 1980s, then, it was evident that a subject potentially capable of ushering in socialism existed in Harvey’s work at a theoretical level only – and even then there are reasons to believe that this subject was not as central to the analysis as one might suppose or as coherent and self-possessed as it appeared to be. Through the nineties, it seems to me that the identification of determinate anti-capitalist actors became something Harvey more-or-less gave up on in his writings. This was not simply a function of the objective weakening of the labour movement worldwide. It was as much a response to the already mentioned crisis of Marxism in
the academy and the rise of other left-wing paradigms like feminism. After *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Harvey’s attempts to bring non-capitalist forms of ‘difference’ into his analysis inevitably rendered the notion of a broadly identifiable working-class subject even less plausible. Indeed, it is telling that in *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* Harvey defines class not as a determinate constituency of people but more generally as ‘positional identity in relation to processes of capital accumulation’ (1996a: 359). This ecumenical definition is, I think, Harvey’s concession to the fact that all subjects on the ground are ‘discerned’ in Paul Smith’s (1988) sense of the term. That is, all individuals are interpellated into multiple subject-positions that mesh in often contradictory ways such that a person’s ‘true interests’ are anything but clear. Given this, ‘class is a question not of identity or coherence . . . but of composition’ (Thoburn 2003: 63).

This is not to say that Harvey has given up on the idea that class matters as his career has evolved. But it is to say that he now concedes that class consciousness and class action must be understood in relation to non-capitalist forms of identity within and between various ‘militant particularisms’. Because he has taken little interest in analysing these forms of identity substantively, his most recent writings on class have inevitably been quite general in character. His ultimately banal observation in *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* that ‘agency is everywhere’ to the extent that capitalism is now everywhere set the tone. For instance, in the early chapters of *Spaces of Hope* he argues (sensibly enough) that in these neoliberal times wage-workers need to recognize their common interests, even if those workers may be massively differentiated by ethnicity, nation, gender, etc. Similarly, in *The New Imperialism* he usefully identifies what labour movements and the more inchoate ‘anti-capitalist’ movement prominent ‘post-Seattle’ have in common. But in both cases, because he lacks an exacting theoretical grasp of non-capitalist forms of power and resistance, his comments about agency lack specificity – even at the theoretical, never mind empirical, level.

In sum, that most talismanic of Marxist ideas – an insurgent working-class actor who is capitalism’s gravedigger – has been steadily attenuated in Harvey’s work as the years have gone by. It seems to me that, ironically, his is a critical theory that lacks a subject. This is no mere function of temporary historical circumstance – the fact that over the last thirty years the workers’ movements have suffered defeats at the local, national and global levels. More profoundly, it is, I’m arguing, a result of an enduring ontological fact: the fact that people’s identities are so multiplex within and between places that the development of working-class consciousness and action at any geographical scale is a precarious achievement that is exceedingly hard won.
In the previous two sections I have discussed two ways in which Harvey’s theoretical works have aspired to be ‘critical’. By placing these works in a wider social and intellectual context, I have suggested their critical bite has yielded to less determinate forms of argumentation over time. My contention has been that, since the early nineties, Harvey’s writings have lost some of the theoretical rigour of his earlier work as a result of the failings of both critique and an implausible conception of working-class agency. The result is that Harvey’s objections to capitalism have become more explicit but also more abstract and ‘moralistic’, while his conception of anti-capitalist struggle has become ever less precise. In this final main section of the chapter, I want to turn to a third dimension of the putative power of David Harvey’s critical theorization of capitalism. It is one that he has barely ever discussed but which is absolutely vital to any proper evaluation of the impact his writings have had this last thirty-plus years. It concerns the degree to which he has taken steps to ensure that his ideas travel beyond university audiences.

Harvey is an academic who has worked in universities his whole professional life. He began his career at Bristol University in the sixties, became a professor at Johns Hopkins University in the early seventies, took the Halford Mackinder chair of geography at Oxford University in 1987, and then moved back to Hopkins in the nineties before taking up his current (and probably last) post at CUNY in 2000. Though he has been involved in left-wing political struggles in his private life, the bulk of his professional existence has been dedicated to thinking, teaching and writing. This commitment to academia has served him well. The intellectual freedoms afforded by the Western university have allowed him and his generation of Anglophone Marxists to construct a corpus of work that, as I noted in the introduction, was virtually non-existent prior to the seventies.

At whom has this corpus of work been directed though? The obvious answer is other (non-Marxist) academics for the most part, as well as degree students. From Social Justice until at least The Condition of Postmodernity, Harvey’s writings were attempts to demonstrate the perspicuity of Marxist ideas to geographers and urban analysts who had scarcely encountered them until Harvey, Castells and a few others burst on the scene. Important as this paradigm-shifting endeavour was, in recent years Harvey has clearly had his eye on audiences beyond the university. The unexpected success of The Condition – which sold among educated sections of the public as much as paid academics – seemed to embolden him to pitch many of his subsequent writings more widely. This is most obviously the case with The New Imperialism, which began life as a series of public lectures delivered
in Oxford (see Castree 2005). And Harvey has, in other recent works, expressed a belief that his ideas do travel beyond academia. Thus, in *Spaces of Capital* (his ‘greatest hits’ book) he has described his work as an attempt ‘to change ways of thought . . . among the public at large’ as much as in the academy (Harvey 2001a: vii). Similarly, in a reissue of *The Limits* he expressed the hope that his work might help ‘inform . . . practices on the part of oppositional forces committed to finding an alternative to capitalist hegemony’ (Harvey 1999a: xxvii).

Harvey’s aspiration to connect with wider constituencies outside the university is, of course, consistent with the Marxist tradition his work has so richly extended. As Anderson (1983: 14) rightly noted, ‘Marxist theory, bent on understanding the world, has always aimed at an asymptotic unity with a popular practice seeking to transform it’. If, for argument’s sake, we discount the conclusions of the previous section, we can ask how well Harvey has pitched his claims to non-academic, left-wing audiences. In other words, if we assume that during his career a strong labour movement potentially receptive to Marxist ideas had existed in the Anglophone world, then we can speculate as to whether his work might have served as a ‘guide to action’ on that ‘political proving ground . . . [which], in the analysis, is the only one that counts’ (Harvey 1989: 15, 16).

Such speculation does not presume that Harvey is entirely responsible for the wider impact of his writings as a theorist. But to the extent that theory cannot represent itself – it must, after all, be represented (by a living theorist, David Harvey) – then the site in and from which theoretical work is undertaken undoubtedly makes a difference to who encounters it. Antonio Gramsci wisely noted that ‘the critic’s starting point is “knowing thyself” as a product of historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory’ (cited in Said 2001: 170). Harvey, it seems, has failed to heed this injunction. In none of his attempts at self-explanation (e.g. the *New Left Review* interview of 2000 or the very biographical introduction to *Spaces of Hope*) does he consider how his academic location has materially affected the extent to which his ideas travel beyond academics accustomed to the intellectual difficulties of his work. A considered examination of Harvey’s socialization in the academy, I would suggest, might explain why his hopes to have reached non-academic audiences may only have been minimally realized. Let me explain.

Early in the chapter I mentioned Harvey’s activist epistemology, but such an epistemology must reckon with the fact that not all knowledges are equally ‘active’ within the wider society. Academics are, of course, principally producers of new knowledge – philosophical, theoretical and empirical. But where they were once, perhaps, special in this regard, today they are just
one of many knowledge producers in late capitalist societies. Broadcasters, computer designers, lawyers, management consultants, policy experts and journalists are some of the many professionals who nowadays create and distribute knowledge rather than, say, material goods. Most of these professionals – like most academics – speak and write in a *lingua franca* largely unintelligible to ordinary people. A few of them, though, are ‘organic intellectuals’ in Gramsci’s expansive but precise sense of the term: that is, people whose ideas aim to ‘organize interests, gain more power, get more control’ (Said 1994: 4).

Such people have the influence they do by self-consciously writing in accessible ways (which is not the same as ‘dumbing down’) and disseminating their ideas in media that permit them wide exposure. Judged by these two standards Harvey’s work can be found wanting. First, despite the clarity of his best prose, most non-academics would doubtless perceive his work to be forbiddingly difficult. Secondly, the overwhelming majority of his work has been written for academic audiences rather than any other addressees. Yet, to be an effective thought-shaper today – whatever one’s political beliefs – one needs exposure in newspapers and magazines, as well as on television. This fact perhaps explains why the most prominent left-wing voices of our age are journalists, like George Monbiot and John Pilger, or a documentary-maker like Michael Moore. Journalists use articles, columns and broadcasts to reach wide audiences, often building up a following in the process. Michael Moore has done the same through his docu-films. This is not to say that book publishing no longer matters. On the contrary, the appetite for book reading in Western societies (fictional and non-) remains undiminished. Norena Hertz and Naomi Klein are two radicals whose books have sold to a very large number of people disenchanted with neoliberalism. The success of their polemics shows that thought fundamentally critical of the current order does not lack a ready audience. But unlike Harvey not only are these two best-selling authors not Marxists; they also have the knack of writing for general audiences. Of course, the price of this is that their books lack analytical rigour and depth. But if there’s a lesson here for Harvey it is surely this: to make the Marxist critique of capitalism ‘common-sense’ once more the tactical use of writing and speaking media is required.

Marxists have long boasted that theirs is not only a theory of society but also one that can explain its own existence – in Anderson’s (1983: 11) words, ‘it includes, indivisibly and unremittingly, self-criticism’. Part of this autocritical sensibility must surely extend to an examination of those institutions that have shaped actually existing Marxism in the early twenty-first century. Like virtually all Marxist thinkers of his generation, Harvey has
been the voluntary agent of involuntary determinations bequeathed by the universities he has worked in and for. Yet, as I noted above, the political and moral economy of Western university life has merited virtually no formal discussion in any of Harvey’s few attempts to explain his credo biographically. It’s as if the conditioning forces of higher education – like the demand to publish research in academic journals rather than in more populist outlets – has had no important bearing on the influence of his Marxism. This is, of course, implausible. Like the generation of Marxists to which he belongs, the university environment has afforded Harvey intellectual licence at the cost of wider social relevance. This environment has, indelibly, deposited ‘an infinity of traces’ that have prevented him from sharing his ideas in ways he might otherwise have had the nous to do. Harvey’s detour of theory has, ultimately, had its greatest impact in the academic worlds Harvey inhabits rather than anywhere else.

The (In)Consequences of Theory?

In this chapter I have offered a critical overview of what’s actually or potentially ‘critical’ about David Harvey’s theoretical interrogation of capitalism. I have focused on three things, two relating to the content of Harvey’s writings, the third to his favoured mode and media of communicating his thinking. If my threelfold examination of Harvey’s critical theory of capitalism has seemed ultimately mean-spirited let me end on a positive note. David Harvey remains an absolute inspiration – not only to me but to many who do not necessarily share his Marxian worldview. If I have subjected his work to an exacting examination, then it is only because Harvey sets such high standards for himself and thus for those of us who follow in his wake. He has achieved more than most of us could ever hope to emulate. I hope the almost athletic rational energy he has displayed for over three decades continues undiminished for many years to come. If a critical theory of capitalism is to have any consequences at all, then it first needs theorists of Harvey’s calibre. It is to be hoped that those of my own and a younger generation can make the detour of Marxist theory a necessity, not only for radical academics but also for capitalism’s many discontents in the wider world. If we succeed then it is only because figures like David Harvey have given us the tools to do so.
Notes

1 Jones III’s (2004) book is currently the only published attempt to consider the entirety of Harvey’s writings, prior to which parts of Derek Gregory’s (1995) Geographical Imaginations offered the most synoptic account. In the case of geography and the interdisciplinary Marxist community this absence is particularly egregious. Yet it is not surprising. Geography, Harvey’s ‘native’ discipline (despite his current berth in an anthropology department), is a peculiar subject in that it has no history of celebrating its ‘intellectual giants’ in the way that canonical thinkers in anthropology, sociology, philosophy and the like have been lauded for decades. So even though Harvey’s influence has been immense, the discipline has been slow – perhaps through timidity or embarrassment – to undertake extensive appraisals of his glittering career. Meanwhile, Marxists outside geography have been equally slow to recognize Harvey’s distinctive contributions to their critical discourse for one sad but understandable reason. His professional status as a ‘geographer’ no doubt disposed many Marxists located in departments of history, economics, sociology, etc. to overlook his work for many years. Stereotypes of the discipline probably fed the suspicion that its practitioners had little to contribute theoretically since theirs is principally an ‘empirical’ and ‘applied’ subject. Though Harvey is now, belatedly, seen as a major figure within an embattled Marxist camp, it remains the case that others of his generation (e.g. Jameson and Eagleton) have had their work evaluated in the round while he has not.

2 Harvey has rarely published programmatic pieces that explain his self-understanding and his politics. The various things he has published in this regard – mostly introductions, prefaces and afterwords to his books – I usually find disappointing because they lack depth. Upon close inspection, they tend to tantalize rather than satisfy. Even his interview with New Left Review, where he is very candid about his life’s work, yields only superficial insights. The same can be said of his published exchange with Donna Haraway.

3 Intriguingly, Harvey’s first book as a Marxist was dedicated to ‘all good committed journalists everywhere’ (Harvey 1973a: 19). In the early 1990s, Harvey in fact tried his hand in a journalistic medium: radio. He made a series of programmes on modern cities for BBC Radio 4.

4 And Monbiot and Pilger have also enjoyed success as book writers, using their profiles as journalists to gain a wide audience for their critiques.

5 These exercises in self-explanation typically appear in introductions to his many books.