Harvey's sincere engagement with different theoretical and political projects produces fruitful lines of inquiry, even as he pursues the elaboration of his historical-geographical materialism.

Many readers will already know that there is no shortage of reviews on JNGD (e.g., Brigham et al., 1997; Mathewson, 1997; Braun, 1998, 1999; Corbridge, 1998; Featherstone, 1998; Galano and Lipietz, 1998; Gathorne Hardy, 1998; Hartsock, 1998; Katz, 1998; McDowell, 1998; Williams, 1998; Young, 1998; Barnes, 1999). Why then did we choose to contribute to this body of literature? Aside from the obvious merits of the book, I believe our forum is distinctive for two reasons. The first is the attention paid to moral issues. With few exceptions (e.g., Pulido, 1998), the reviews to date bypass many of the moral questions embedded in JNGD. I do not mean to belittle other foci in these reviews. Nor do I believe that ethics is neatly separable from social theory and its constitutive elements of class, race, gender, identity, etc. Indeed, our moral concerns are the very best reason for robust social theories. Nevertheless, ethics remains a distinct perspective on human ways-of-life, and as such it helps to highlight particular elements in our thoughts and actions. The critical power of ethics lies, therefore, in its ability not only to evaluate who we are now, but also to frame who we may become in the future. This is a task entirely consistent with Harvey's consideration of 'possible worlds', and the reason why JNGD deserves sustained moral reflection.

The second reason is the structure of the forum itself. The editors of Ethics, Place and Environment are dedicated to fostering dialogue through an editorial process that stresses participatory contributions from our readers and authors (Lynn, 1998). For this reason, we want to go beyond the usual forum where reviewers 'criticize' and authors 'correct'. Instead, we want a more responsive kind of review, one whose issues and ideas emerge through the intertextuality of individual voices. Moreover, we desire a format that facilitates deliberation, and sidesteps the anonymity or breathlessness that all too frequently characterizes normative debates. We have adopted, therefore, a dialogue format that breaks the review forum into parts. For the first part, the reviewers collaboratively read and write drafts in light of each other's manuscripts. These are the reviews that are published in this issue. In the second part, Harvey and the reviewers will exchange a second round of manuscripts, the final drafts of which will be published in a subsequent issue.

As a final point, I would like to invite readers to submit their thoughts on JNGD to Ethics, Place and Environment. As I travel and talk with geographers I frequently hear insightful interpretations that are never submitted to print, but if they were, would enrich our individual and collective moral sensibilities. A firm believer in Socrates' aphorism that we are smarter together than we are alone, I encourage you to add your voice to this forum. Please share your moral perspective with us, raise questions we have not adequately addressed, and help us all envision a world in which differences of nature or geography are no barrier to justice.

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Difference, Justice and the Dialectics of a Just Process

GEOGRAPHY READING GROUP, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

(Leila Harris, Hilda Kurtz, Andrea Nightingale, Eric Sheppard, Dmitri Sidorov, Barbara VanDraak)

In a book of astonishing breadth, David Harvey weaves together the influences of such diverse thinkers as Marx, Levitz, Whitehead and Raymond Williams into a dialectical analysis of space, time and environment. Broadly speaking, Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference (JNGD) revolves around three sets of goals: normative, explanatory, and political. To resuscitate a process-oriented, dialectical approach to explanation from recent challenges by the 'posts', Harvey develops an understanding of the mutually constitutive nature of social, nature/society and spatial inequality and difference, devoting a section of the book to each.

Normatively, he wishes to 'provide a solid conceptual apparatus to enquire into the justness of [socio-ecological and political economic relations]' (Harvey, 1996, p. 6). The normative context for evaluating justness is a rapprochement between Marxism and environmentalism, or ecosocialism. Arguing that there is much injustice in these
differences, Harvey raises two political challenges that permeate the book. The first is to translate from localized militant particularisms—radical stances forged in the context of and in reference to conditions of particular places—to global ambition or the potential for all-encompassing revolution. While the dialectician’s task is to translate among different knowledges, the daunting and unresolved nature of this particular translation remains a theme throughout. The second is to nurture the geographical imagination in order to keep alternative possible worlds within view.

Section I begins with the problem of translation between militant particularism and global ambition, offering dialectical reasoning as the primary means of effecting such a translation. Harvey’s explanation of the principles of and insights stemming from dialectical reasoning is masterful, especially as he contrasts these insights with the “Leibnizian conceit” (Harvey, 1996, Chapter 2). He highlights parallels between Leibniz’s monad, a mirror of the universe through which pure philosophical reflection can make everything intelligible by “internalizing everything there is” (Harvey, 1996, p. 69), and the use of internal relations in dialectical reasoning—the way in which each moment of socio-ecological processes internalizes all other moments.

A monad is achieved by treating from the world into pure reflection, creating one of an infinite number of possible worlds that are either multiple perspectives on the ‘real’ world, or multiple possible real worlds. Harvey roots Leibniz’s search for understandings through pure reflection in his frustration with the complexities of 17th-century Europe. He clearly has in mind parallels to Derrida’s emphasis on pure thinking and discourse and on multiple and incomensurable interpretations, as a reaction to the confusion of the postmodern condition. Thus, by the end of the section, the Leibnizian conceit elides into a postmodern conceit that leaves no space for voices from the margin to engage with and transform the world.

In Section II, Harvey builds the theoretical framework for a rapprochement between environmentalist and socialist politics, tracing their common derivation in the domination of nature thesis, and establishing a dialectic in which socio-ecological projects derive from, rationalize and internalize particular constellations of political economy and vice versa. The valuation of nature through capital is the common thread between socio-ecological and political economic projects and, more specifically, between socialist and environmentalist politics. Thus, environmental goals are not realizable without attention to political economy, and socialist transformation also cannot be realized without careful, and just, attention to environmental processes.

But there are considerable obstacles to this project. Political projects of all stripes fall within environmentalism, from the ‘Wise Use’ movement to ‘Earth First!’. Harvey critiques, for example, notions of ‘sustainability’, observing that what is sustained often is a particular political and social order, while the terms and language of sustainability ‘stick as positive reinforcement of policies and politics by giving them the aura of being environmentally sensitive’ (Harvey, 1996, p. 148).

The argument that different environmentalisms imply different political economic orders, each with their concomitant injustices, exemplifies the idea of incomensurate possible worlds in the arena of environmental activism. This apparent incomensurability motivates Harvey to argue that translation is necessary to move from these particularisms towards global emancipation. The way forward is to understand the interrelated nature of forms of domination, without privileging any of them. The environmentalist who buys clothing produced in the maquiladoras, for example, is working at cross purposes to emancipatory projects. Such contradictions call for global ambition against interconnected and interoperable injustices.
Chapter 12 gets at the problem most directly by proposing a framework for a ‘utopia of process’ to counter an historical emphasis, in previous writings on possible worlds, on ‘utopias of form’. This is proposed as ‘normative armament’—a foundational concept that can serve as a tool for action. To sum, he quotes Harway’s pointed encapsulation of his own critique of postmodernism: ‘Some differences are playful; some are poles of world historical systems of domination. Epistemology is about knowing the difference’ (Harvey, 1996, p. 358). Chapter 13 is an attempt to reconcile with the environmental justice movement, which Harvey credits with positing the transformative actions of humans as ecological processes, and with keeping social relations and their justness primary within its realm of concern. His own resolution of the conflict is to opt for a radicalized ecological modernization discourse, where social justice is the central concern, and within which the circulation and accumulation of capital are understood to dictate environmental transformations. The most important contribution of Chapter 14 is Harvey’s assertion that urbanization is a process that creates a built form, rather than a solely spatial-temporal phenomenon. Moreover, focus on directing social relations through the absolutism of even utopian spatial forms is inhibiting to the fluidity of the dialectic process he seeks to construct.

In many senses, the process through which this review was constructed reflects the complexities of space, time and difference at the heart of JNGD. The accelerating pace and multiplying responsibilities of academic life meant that we were rarely in the same room to discuss the book, the membership of the group continuously shifted, and ideas for the review were composed and exchanged more in virtual space than in a common material space. Indeed, one author’s fieldwork did not prevent her from participating from Katmandu. Reactions to the book were conditioned by the very different experiences and situated understandings of the different participants. Indeed, it often seemed that the voices to be melded into the review themselves were often more incommensurate than cognident. In presenting some reactions to the book, therefore, we do not aspire to a unified perspective, but instead provide vignettes of the debates the book provoked in the reading group, as we wrestled with it and with one another’s ideas. The passion of these debates is testimony to the book’s impact.

Militant particularism itself provoked the most intense debate. For some, the language of militancy was harmless polemic and not seen as advocating a violent translation from particular to global. For others the word ‘militant’ evoked a discourse of violence against others which itself is unethical, reminiscent of Soviet Marxism and other totalitarian regimes, and paradoxical in a book on justice. The contrast was highlighted by contrasting selections from the work of Adrienne Rich. The first is the dark language of Rich’s Atlas of a Difficult World (1991) that Harvey selected for the prologue (Harvey, 1996, p. vii). The other is a statement from her earlier writing and takes a very different tone.

So politics is reduced to government, to contests between the empowered, or to petty in-group squabbles. I feel as if I’ve been resisting the limits of these definitions for at least half of my life. In 1969 I wrote in a journal: ‘The moment when a feeling enters the body—is political. This touch is political’. By which I mean, that politics is the effort to find ways of humanly dealing with each other—as groups or as individuals—politics being simply process, the breaking down of barriers of oppression, tradition, culture, ignorance, fear, self-protectiveness (Rich, 1993, p. 24).

The uncharted path between the poles of militant particularism and global ambition also was the subject of ongoing discussion. Harvey’s emphasis on the translation between these poles as a process of abstraction created a gray area into which Geography Reading Group (GRG) members injected differing visions of the terrain lying between. Some felt that the translation required more explicit attention to the ways in which political, social and economic institutions create both obstacles to and opportunities for political action. Others supposed that the building of political networks by activists was the key to understanding the translation as a political (and emancipatory) project. The tenor of this discussion reflected a concern that Harvey had left too few signposts for translating his conceptual framework of possible worlds into pragmatic political action aimed at building those worlds.

For Harvey, any call to reformulate social relations must be accompanied by at least an attempt to demonstrate how the reconfigured world would proceed. Yet his own book concludes without providing a useful map from the abstract to the visible, or of the route between the global and the local. This failure to develop a plan of action is the book’s most acute shortcoming. While the book is a major contribution in its analysis and its call to action, it stands vulnerable to a charge that it has nothing new to offer, concluding as it seems to with a call for all of the local, particularist movements to unite across a global scale—somewhere.

Such a charge would be an unfortunate distraction from the real power of Harvey’s argument. Harvey’s bent always has been to carry through his vision to material practice. He once again takes the lead, but now differently, in uniting ‘us’—human beings—in a struggle against injustice based in the concrete, material conditions of life. This book differs fundamentally from his earlier work in its pluralist, integrative vision, wherein identities are retained and respected but share a commonality in their bases in historic-materialist practices, which are recognized and used as a communicative tool—a common language.

The book’s important contribution stands in that it problematizes the current relation between postmodernism and historical-materialism, and in its plea for further discussion and the creation of a new utopian process that dialectically connects the two, and connects the particular with the universal. Here he stops short, not quite portraying the fully fleshed-out vision of the world under a utopian process of justice. But he carries the vision further than perhaps anyone has, despite an unresolved ending.

Note
1. This is the third review written by the Minnesota GRG since its inception in the late 1970s. Through this written work, the GRG has embraced the challenge of presenting a ‘collective response’, a challenge that mirrors the very process that Harvey strives toward in JNGD. We attempt to respect and retain our diversity of ideas, and yet weave them into a coherent piece that conveys the general sense of our discussions.

References