

Toward a Non-Totalizing Critique of Capitalism

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I critically engage from a feminist perspective with arguments from David Harvey's *Condition of Postmodernity*. Using feminist insights into epistemology and ontology, I argue that Harvey's is a totalizing theory, and as such, lacks the emancipatory value it claims to offer. I then engage with some feminist critiques of Harvey's work, arguing that, while innovative, they are insufficient insofar as they fail to provide a critique of capitalism. Drawing on the work of feminist epistemologist Lorraine Code, I explore what a non-totalizing theory of capitalism might look like. I conclude by arguing the work of Gibson-Graham and Resnick and Wolff provide the most useful and emancipatory theoretical framework, one that is non-totalizing yet engages in a thorough critique of capitalism.

Key Words: feminist theory, capitalism, emancipatory theory, Marxism



INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the academic left found itself in an internal battle over fundamental epistemological and ontological questions. Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Richard Rorty, as well as many others, had all challenged the ontological accuracy and emancipatory potential of what became known as "meta-narratives" and the possibility of ascertaining and representing an objectively knowable reality that existed independently from our understandings and representations of it. Instead, some leftist academics, including many feminists (e.g., Nicholson 1990), turned toward a critical interrogation of the role of language and discourse as productive of, rather than mere reflections or representations of, the social and natural world (e.g., Butler 1990).

In this conception, variously termed 'post-modernism' or 'post-structuralism,' universalist Enlightenment notions of unity, reality,



objectivity and truth are critically interrogated and historically situated in social space and time. Such conceptions became understood as inherently Western and dependent on a problematic grammar, logic, and epistemology premised, in particular, on binaries and negation (see Haraway 1991). This logic was criticized for producing a host of oppressive relations, including patriarchy, racism, and heteronormativity, each of which relied on a binary relationship of negation (e.g., male/not male; white/not white; straight/not straight; powerful/powerless).

Postmodernism and post-structuralism exploded the modern conception of the subject, knowledge production, representation, and politics, through the development of partial, situated, and local knowledges (e.g., Alarcon 1991). Its practitioners reconceptualized power as diffuse and always present, and understood representation and discourse as powerful producers of social reality. This conception presented a sharp contrast to the modernist/Leftist conception of power and oppression (in which some groups possess power and others do not, and material relationships function independent of their representation) and had important implications for leftist politics. From a postmodern/post-structural viewpoint, the key to altering power relations was not to seize power from the powerful and transform the material relations of oppression, but rather to harness the productive power of representation and discourse to produce social space through performance and parody that explode the restrictive, oppressive grammar of binaries (Foucault 1977).

This alternative conception, though celebrated by some, was derided by others on the left, particularly Marxists. For Marxists, whose theories were predicated on a universal conception of the subject embodied in one's objectively knowable and material class position, postmodernism undermined the ability to make universal claims about exploitation and the nature of capitalism. Staying true to the base/superstructure conception of the primacy of the mode of production in

determining social relations, some Marxists lamented that postmodernism and its attendant politics were mere side effects of the most recent permutation of capitalism (Harvey 1989, Jameson 1991). Perhaps most famously, Fredric Jameson argued that postmodernism represented the "cultural logic of late capitalism" (Jameson 1991). Elaborating on Jameson's claim, Marxist geographer David Harvey (1989) developed a nuanced account of the emergent political economy of post-Fordist production, arguing that postmodern philosophy and politics emerge from, and functionally shore up, capitalism by rendering group politics impossible. This is particularly problematic for Marxists, who understand the capitalist social relation of value production and its appropriation as the source of oppression and injustice.

Harvey's feminist interlocutors, many of whom had found postmodern philosophy politically enabling, launched a powerful critique of his claims. They took particular exception to his assertion that postmodern philosophy was a side effect, rather than a deliberate and carefully constructed philosophical position that arose from critique and analysis of the social world. Both Harvey and his feminist critics offer powerful and important arguments that retain their purchase and relevance for political-geographic theory nearly twenty years later. The debate, which was bitter and at times personal, came at a troubling time for both Marxist and feminist academics. In the discipline of geography, Marxism was enjoying a revival, and had become widely accepted, if not dominant, in the late 1980s, yet it was falling out of fashion in other social science disciplines and the liberal arts, as postmodern philosophy gained dominance. In women's studies and academic feminism – which had only recently found its footing in academic institutions – white, liberal, second-wave feminists were facing, and attempting to respond to, serious critiques from women of color, queer theorists, and women of the global South regarding the ontological fixity of the category "woman" and its efficacy as a foundational political

category. As re-emergent politically engaged frames for geographic analysis and inquiry, both Marxism and feminism were fighting for theoretical space. Over time, however, these battles have become less personal, controversial, and bitterly fought, though no less relevant for theoretically informed political action (praxis).

In this paper, I explore the evolution of this debate, with particular attention to the political implications of each argument. I argue that Harvey's analysis of the pitfalls of postmodern philosophy are important, but he attributes too much primacy to class processes and attributes too much power to class relations under capitalism. Due to his assertions that capitalism as a mode of production is productive of all facets of social life, his is ultimately a totalizing theory that produces limited political possibilities and replicates some of the shortcomings of modernist ontological and epistemological theorizing. I engage with his feminist critics to explore the political implications of their critiques, and conclude that their positions, while illuminating, are politically disabling insofar as they are inattentive to material social relations and capitalist exploitation. While others have sought to reconcile feminist postmodern epistemology and politics with Marxism, I argue that followers of the Amherst school of neo-Marxism, including Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham (who write under the collective pen name J.K. Gibson-Graham), and Richard Wolff and Stephen Resnick, provide the most politically enabling critique of capitalism. I then use feminist epistemologist Lorraine Code's (2006) concept of ecological thinking to develop a framework for what a non-totalizing critique of capitalism might look like, and argue that neo-Marxism provides a particularly "ecological" conception of capitalism.

The process of theory construction and its subsequent legitimization is, in and of itself, intensely political (Code 2006). It is not only the outcome of the process that has political implications (the theory itself) but the process itself that has political implica-

tions. Code (2006) has brought attention to the process of knowledge production and theorizing, arguing that that knowledge production which seeks liberatory ends, as most leftist theorizing does, must be democratic, deliberative, and participatory if it is to be non-oppressive. If not, it only functions to recreate oppression by denying the epistemic authority of others to create meaningful and legitimate accounts of their oppression. Totalizing theories and their knowledge production processes assume authority of the part of the theorizer to know fully and completely how and why oppression operates everywhere. In so doing, they re-create oppression in the process of knowledge production.

HARVEY'S ARGUMENT

The Condition of Postmodernity (Harvey 1989) is a nuanced Marxist account of the causal relationship between a changing regime of accumulation (from Fordism to post-Fordism) and the changing mode of regulation (from the modern period to the postmodern period).¹ He painstakingly constructed what he understood as the relationship between changing production practices and changing subjectivities to demonstrate the way that postmodern philosophy and postmodern subjectivity are byproducts of late capitalist social relations. As a traditional Marxist, Harvey found emancipatory promise in the modernist notion of a coherent subject of the "worker" and saw postmodern subjectivity as a challenge to the one notion that could revolutionize social and economic relationships (Wright 2006). Harvey's analysis is compelling, well-researched, and convincing. To make his argument, however, Harvey asserted that the social relations of production and the logic of capitalist production are the productive locus of all other social relations. Capitalist social relations shape, but are not meaningfully shaped by, non-class processes (that is, all processes that do not entail the production and extraction of surplus value). This position, which I argue is ultimately a totalizing account of oppression, can neither

accommodate other accounts of the origins of social oppression nor can it take seriously political praxis that is not grounded in class politics.

Influenced by the regulation school of Marxist thinking, Harvey (1989) argued that a shift occurred in the mid-1970s that accounts for the emergence of postmodernism. A general crisis of capitalism in the early 1970s led to a retooling of the production practices of capitalism as well as the social and financial practices which support it. Harvey named this emerging system “flexible accumulation” and argued it is a direct response to the rigidities of Fordism.

Flexible accumulation is characterized by a new flexibility in “labor processes, labor markets, products and patterns of consumption” (Harvey 1989, 147). This shift is also characterized by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, including financial services, new markets, and intense innovation in commercial, technological and organizational management. Manufacturers shifted their focus from economies of scale, in which large-scale mass production is necessary to realize a profit, to economies of scope, in which quick, short term disposable products increased the rate of consumption. Flexible accumulation, Harvey argued, has to simultaneously increase the rate of consumption to accommodate its increased rate of production (1989).

The psychic and material relationship to space and time are important for Harvey’s account. The drive to “annihilate space” by time is inherent to capitalism. The more time that capital is stored in commodities between production and consumption, the less profit is extracted. Space, or distance between production and consumption, represents lost profits in the form of transit time. But space, and the problem it represents, can be annihilated through decreasing transit time through technological innovation. This drive to collapse space-time is inherent to capitalism, and, he argued, was accelerated during Fordism (Harvey 1989).

The triumph of time over space results in the elimination of borders, and provides

capital with unlimited access to virtually all space (Harvey 1989). With capital no longer limited by spatial constraints, there is a greater competition between places to attract capital. Thus, the particular qualities of a place in relation to its ability to attract capital become its defining characteristics (Harvey 1989, 271). As such, place-based identities that were once taken for granted due to their spatial given-ness, are reasserted in the face of space-time compression in a new, more forceful way, and in the process, he argued, local identities are reinforced.

The intensification of space-time relations, or the annihilation of space by time, became manifested, Harvey argued, in the lived experience of people in the form of increased communication with, and knowledge of, others. People became more and more aware of and connected to the global world, producing psychic and material experiences that manifested themselves simultaneously in an increased sense of global unity and an increasing sense of social difference. The more unified space became, Harvey argued, “the more important the qualities of the fragmentations become for social identity and action” (1989, 271).

If the modern period is characterized by a tension between the universal and the particular, Harvey argued the postmodern period is characterized by a nihilistic particularism brought on by the imperatives of the post-Fordist regime of accumulation. In addition to general conditions of production creating a space-time collapse, post-Fordism is also characterized by a turn away from the production of durable goods in favor of ephemeral, disposable services. This, coupled with an increasingly place-bound identity resulting from the annihilation of space by time, yields the postmodern conception of fractured, fleeting and incoherent ahistorical subjects. Harvey argued this post-Fordist economic shift is manifested in the postmodern cultural tendencies toward ephemeral, particular, place-based identities.

Harvey’s account is a totalizing one because he claimed to fully explain the emergence

of postmodernism through these economic transformations, and privileged the social relations of production as the only causal relationships. "If there is a meta-theory with which to embrace all these gyrations of postmodern thinking and cultural production," he asked, "then why should we not deploy it?" (1989, 337). Though he made a compelling case for the concurrent emergence of a postmodern subjectivity and post-Fordism, as his feminist critics pointed out, he could not accommodate for the role of feminists, or others, in actively producing a postmodern subjectivity (or understanding of oneself in the world) as an intentional political strategy with emancipatory potential (Deutsche 1991; Morris 1992; Massey 1994). Rather, in his theory, all postmodern consciousness has emerged in service to, and as a result of, capital's changing regime of accumulation.

But Harvey's point was not simply to argue that economic conditions produced postmodern subjectivities. The political implications of postmodern philosophy were problematic for Harvey as well. His political project was motivated by his Marxist conviction that capitalism and its need for exploitation are, if not the cause of all oppression, then certainly its most pressing manifestation. To combat capitalism, a shared, historical consciousness of global unity among the exploited is required. Without such a consciousness, political action intended to be progressive, but grounded in a particular notion of identity, will not only be co-opted by capitalism, but operate in service to the logic of late capitalism as represented by post-Fordism and flexible accumulation (Harvey 1989).

Harvey also had epistemological concerns with postmodernism. The postmodern assertion that reality is not knowable, or does not exist, undermines the traditional Marxist belief that class is an objective, knowable relationship to the means of production that drives capitalism and produces unjust social conditions. By asserting the partiality of objective knowledge, postmodern epistemology undermines the authority of a Marxist political economic analysis. "Under

such theorizations, Marx's call for workers of the world to unite appears as a dream wish. For to assume that different workers share an experience of self based on a common experience of work is to assume that there exists not just a knowable subject but also a knowable category of experience that is common across different subjects. Such assumptions are impossible under post-structuralism" (Wright 2006, 84).

FEMINISTS RESPOND

Harvey's argument did not go unanswered by feminists who had been exploring the political and epistemic possibilities of postmodernist philosophy (Deutsche 1991; Morris 1992; Massey 1994). Two dominant critiques emerged from feminists in response. The first is that Harvey failed to engage with feminist theory, which played an important role in developing postmodern epistemology. As such, his analysis of the emergence of postmodernism is incomplete. Second, they argued that Harvey created a totalizing theory that cannot explain its own authority, and functions to delegitimize the epistemic authority of others, including feminists. They rejected the implication in his argument that queer theorists, feminists, and others who have developed arguments about the cultural roots of their exploitation and marginality are subject to a false consciousness, and should reject their claims to particularity and uniqueness in order to see their ultimate commonality, which is reducible to their class position.

By failing to engage meaningfully with feminist theory, his critics argued, Harvey leaves his own notions of the world unchallenged (Deutsche 1991; Morris 1992; Massey 1994). In this respect, they charged Harvey with errors of omission that function in a mutually reinforcing relationship with his account of the world: they both stem from, as well as function to reinforce, his ontological assumptions. "It should not be acceptable," Massey charged, "that a large part of the central literature is simply missing from what sets out to be a comprehensive overview, and

that whole lines of debate are simply ignored” (1994, 239). Massey is referring to the robust feminist literature, including the work of Haraway (1991), Harding (1986, 1987) and Morris (1988), which had explored and taken on postmodernism from a feminist perspective. This omission served to reinforce his underlying claim that class politics are *the* location from which to do emancipatory politics. Though feminists have never fully and unconditionally embraced postmodern epistemology or subjectivity, they have critiqued universal, coherent subjectivity (Nicholson 1990, Alarcon 1991, Butler and Scott 1992) as limiting, androcentric, and ultimately oppressive to those whose subjectivities and experiences of the world are “made impossible” by such an account. Having theorized the possibilities and problems with postmodernism and the political possibilities it contains, his attempt at a comprehensive account should have engaged with feminist analyses of postmodernism and its implications.

The primary tenets of postmodern philosophy, including an appreciation for difference, challenges to modernist epistemology and conceptions of the subject, and the politicization of representation, arose from the cultural sphere and through intellectual debate (Massey 1994). Harvey, on the other hand, located the emergence of postmodern subjectivity and philosophy in the experience of space-time compression, and thus, Massey argues, he renders the cultural sphere insufficiently autonomous. More autonomy and intentionality needs to be attributed to the work of feminists, because they arrived at their positions on postmodernism through analysis and critique, not merely through experience of space-time compression (1994).

Harvey’s critics acknowledged that he articulates dissatisfaction with the most traditional and classical formulations of the simple base/superstructure model of Marxism, and aligns himself with the regulation school in general. Regulation theory departs from classical Marxism insofar as the evolution of the economy is understood as contingent (that is, it does not evolve towards the pre-determined

end of communism), and a greater emphasis is placed on the mechanisms which smooth out capitalist social relations. Theoretically, this means more attention is paid to the role of nonclass processes and their function relative to capitalism.² But despite Harvey’s general acknowledgements of Marxism’s inability to explain racism and patriarchy, Massey argued that he never really addresses this shortcoming of his theory. Rather, he maintained that:

[the] sole axis of power which matters in relation to these distinct forms of domination is that which stems fairly directly from the relations of production. No other relations of power and dominance are seriously addressed. The fact that patriarchy, for instance, is not reducible to the terms of a debate on modes of production, is not considered (1994, 221).

To demonstrate this point, Massey takes up his analysis of David Lynch’s film *Blue Velvet*, in which a “bizarre and violent sex-crazed underworld” exists alongside a suburban utopia. Harvey reads this film as a juxtaposition of worlds that are incompatible. In Massey’s reading, however, the suburban utopian and its “other”, the sex-crazed underworld are not incompatible, but in fact mutually constitutive and dependent worlds. Postmodernism, with its emphasis on multiplicity and performance, is better able to provide a politically powerful understanding of the relationship between the two worlds represented in *Blue Velvet*, as well as other social phenomena. According to Massey:

Male violence, for instance, is a large part of what maintains the institution of marriage and its variants in contemporary society and ‘monogamy’ has frequently been upheld by its negation, by outside interests, whether these took the form of nineteenth-century prostitution or the male, or more ‘egalitarian’ (?) [sic] something-on-the-side more typical of today’s professional middle classes. Prurience is one of the requirements for the existence of pornography” (Massey 1994, 225).

Where Harvey sees a politically disabling turn toward particularism, postmodern analysis leads to an acknowledgement of, appreciation for the epistemic authority of, subaltern space. Whereas the modernist conception of unity cannot accommodate a conception of either social phenomena (such as suburbia or male violence) as without a unified, discernable essence, postmodern philosophy assumes multiplicity. Within feminist theory, this conception was particularly useful for exploding the category “woman” as a coherent, unified category with a discernable essence. Women of color, queer theorists, and women from the global south in particular, raised important critiques of the discursive construction of the category “woman,” arguing that it was ontologically impossible and politically disabling. Western second wave feminism had a painful period of introspection once it began to engage meaningfully with critiques that the unitary category “woman” reified sex/gender essences and differences, producing categories that did violence to real experiences (see for example Butler 1990, Anzaldúa 1987).

While his feminist interlocutors waged important and valid critiques of Harvey’s epistemological and theoretical approach, they also failed to offer a meaningful critique of capitalism. They attacked Harvey’s deterministic account, calling it “hardly exhaustive” (Deutsche 1991, 8), “reductive” (Morris 1992), and “inadequate” (Massey 1994, 216). But while Morris (1992) claimed that she did not want to see political economy dispensed with, Nancy Hartsock (2005) has observed that one can read each of these critiques and get the sense that the theorists considered political economy largely irrelevant to cultural developments. Thus, for purposes of developing a non-totalizing critique of capitalism, his feminist critics provide little guidance.

THINKING “ECOLOGICALLY” ABOUT CAPITALISM

If the modernist ontology and epistemology employed by Harvey results in the

marginalizing of feminist thought and creates a totalizing theory that is problematic, what then is a desirable approach to theory building that avoids the totalizing impulse in modernist thought, accommodates feminist theories, and retains a critique of capitalism? Feminist epistemologist Lorraine Code has developed a conception she calls “ecological thinking” which is a useful guideline for the development of a non-totalizing critique of capitalism (2006). The word “ecological” is invoked as a metaphor to suggest the common threads between an ecological perspective in the traditional sense, broadly concerned with habitats and feedback loops, and the epistemological approach she is proposing, which places the act of knowledge production in a broader social and physical context. Ecological thinking, as conceptualized by Code, is a “remapping” of the social imaginary to open space for other ways of knowing with the intent of destabilizing and denaturalizing universalist narratives of mastery. Code uses the phrase “social imaginary” to describe the set of narratives and commonsense relationships that operate tacitly and largely unquestioned in the background of our day-to-day interactions, as well as our epistemological practices and theory-building processes. The hegemonic conception of the “economy” as a unitary and totalizing force is one such example of the kinds of shared social imaginaries that Code’s call for ecological thinking would interrogate.

In particular, ecological thinking operates in the reciprocal relationship between ethico-political concerns and epistemology. Whereas the ethics of the practice of producing knowledge are typically divorced from epistemological conceptions of what is knowable and how to best represent reality, ecological thinking politicizes the very process by which knowledge is produced, understanding it as *part of* rather than *above* or *after* the phenomena under study. She used a case of a whistle-blowing doctor in Canada to demonstrate that knowledge is legitimized through a social process that is shaped by the

social imaginary, not by strict adherence to scientific method. She traced the way politics and representation of the doctor and her ethics shifted the public perception of her legitimacy over time despite the fact that her scientific methods and claims remained the same throughout. This disjuncture, according to Code, exemplified the way in which knowledge production practices are already influenced by a social context, and she argued that by acknowledging and embracing this, we can make knowledge production practices both more inclusive and more responsive to ethical concerns.

The need for ecological thinking, Code argued, stems from relationship between knowledge production practices and their influence on the social imaginary (2006). Currently, orthodox theories of knowledge function to distribute “authority, expertise, power, and privilege” unequally both through the logic of autonomy and objectivity that guide traditional epistemologies, as well as through the totalizing knowledges they create (2006, 5). Discourses of mastery “derive from and underwrite a reductive imaginary in which epistemic and moral agents are represented as isolated units on an indifferent landscape, to which their relation, too, is one of disengaged indifference” (2006, 19). By claiming objectivity, such knowledge production practices fail to problematize the very logic upon which they draw from the social imaginary, and fail to take responsibility for the process of producing knowledge. As the example of the Canadian doctor suggests, in the public sphere, ethics and legitimacy are intimately intertwined in the process of legitimizing knowledge. Similarly, Code argued, concepts like racism and sexism, which pervade the social imaginary, meaningfully shape so-called objective research. At the same time, by failing to acknowledge the relationship between knowledge production and the social imaginary, scientific knowledge production fails to take responsibility for the social implications of findings. Emancipatory knowledge production practices, Code argued, will engage with, and disrupt the social

imaginary to create space for non-traditional, inclusionary and situated knowledge.

The goal of ecological thinking as Code (2006) defines it, is:

to interrupt and unsettle the instituted social-political-epistemological imaginary of the affluent western world that generates and sustains hegemonic practices of mastery with a web of assumptions and of tacit agreements that are everyone’s and no one’s about ‘nature’ and ‘human nature’ and how to best know them singly and in their interrelations (29).

Ecological thinking is a particularly promising way out of the impasse between Harvey and his feminist interlocutors, because it specifically addresses the politics of theory building as well as the outcomes of the theory. In so doing, it allows space for including feminist and other contributions to theory, and thus overcomes the totalizing critiques made of Harvey. Ecological thinking also redirects the goal of knowledge production and theory building away from “uncovering” reality and representing it as closely as possible, and instead looks at the work that theory does politically. The work of neo-Marxists J.K. Gibson-Graham, Stephen Resnick, and Richard Wolff provide a particularly ecological approach to the study of capitalism.

NEO-MARXISM: NON-TOTALIZING POLITICAL ECONOMY

The so-called “Amherst school” of neo-Marxism offers a critique of capitalism that harnesses the power of Marxist analysis while allowing for the epistemic authority that springs from marginalized people’s lives as well. Pioneered by Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) and Resnick and Wolf (1987) anti-essentialist Marxism, or “neo-Marxism,” understands all socio-economic-political processes to be “overdetermined.” Overdetermination is an ontological starting place assumes that social processes (such as capitalism) have no “invariant essence” but

are “constituted by its continually changing ‘outsides’” (Gibson-Graham 1996, 16). In other words, social processes and relationships, including gender, race, sexuality, can meaningfully influence capitalism specifically and other economic relations more generally. This conceptualization is a departure from the more traditional conception of economic relations as the “base” that shapes, but is not shaped by, the cultural “superstructure.”

Inspired by the work of Althusser (1969), Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) and Resnick and Wolff (1987) problematized classical Marxist ontology and epistemology. Through a conception of the social and economic world as overdetermined, they dislodge the more traditional Marxist conception of the economic “base” determining the cultural “superstructure.” By understanding the social world as overdetermined, they resist declaring epistemic authority over other theories that might offer different accounts of the world, or privilege non-class relations. In their account, the usefulness of Marxist political economy toward progressive political ends and social theorizing is not that it is the most accurate or realistic account of social relations, as Harvey argued (1989). Rather, by using class as an “entry point” into theorizing the social world, we gain a particular set of insights that we might not otherwise understand. This important not only for theorizing, but for developing theoretically informed political action, as well. Unlike classical Marxists, neo-Marxists believe that class relations are not the only promising medium for progressive political action. While they use class as an epistemological entry point, it is not privileged in any way above the kinds of identity politics that tend to characterize postmodern-inflected political practice. As a result, neo-Marxism makes space for other theories to claim simultaneous epistemic authority, and in so doing, legitimizes political practice that does not seek to directly to redress class-based exploitation.

For Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) and Resnick and Wolf (1987), discourse, language, and representation and not merely

barriers to understanding the world as it actually exists, rather, they are producing the social world. As Gibson-Graham argued, by discursively constructing and representing the economy and its mode of production (capitalism) as a coherent system within which all other social relations operate, we reify its power as a system (Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006). Gibson-Graham called this way of representing the socio-economic-political world “capitalocentric” (Gibson-Graham 1996). Capitalocentrism not only helps to maintain the hegemony of capitalism, but is politically disabling as well. Because capitalocentrism theorizes capitalism as a coherent, ever-present system, its demise requires total systemic overhaul. Instead, they argue for a conception of the socio-economic-political world as multiple and heterogeneous, in which capitalist social relations exist, but are just one of many different types of existing and meaningful economic relationships.

Following the spirit of ecological thinking, for neo-Marxists the goal of theory is to create *a* narrative rather than *the* narrative, and to disrupt the hegemony of totalizing, oppressive narratives. In this tradition, theory building is a “discursive intervention” rather than an “accurate representation” (Graham 1990). As such, Resnick and Wolff and Gibson-Graham can choose an entry point as a means for analysis without assuming it is in any way more important than other processes. Starting with a particular entry point, according to Graham (1990) will not “give us a ‘better’ understanding of the social totality than we would have if we started somewhere else. But it will give us a *different* understanding, which produces *different* effects” (59, emphasis in original).³

Neo-Marxists have chosen class processes as entry points, and in so doing understand class to be central to Marxist theory but make no claims that it is central to social life. Further, neo-Marxists understand their own relationship to the desire to study class processes as overdetermined. They charge traditional Marxists with mistaking their own studies of a few processes with a total-

izing conception of all social processes. The neo-Marxist approach to studying political economy thus is non-totalizing and ecological insofar as it seeks to construct analysis that can complement or operate alongside other accounts of the world.

In addition to the challenges that their conception of economic practices make to the social imaginary about the coherence of the economy, the work of neo-Marxists is also ecological and non-totalizing insofar as it can co-exist with and recognize the epistemic authority of other theories. Resnick and Wolff argued that their approach allows them to:

recognize and construct explanations of the different stresses of those who grasp reality otherwise. We formulate our attitudes toward those others in terms of the social causes and consequences which our analysis connects to their theories. On the basis of those attitudes, we form alliances with some of those different theories (and theorists) and struggle against others (1992, 134).

This ability to learn from other theories, theorists, and accounts of the social and economic world is what ultimately makes the neo-Marxist account of capitalism non-totalizing. Inspired by an ontological understanding of the world as overdetermined, and reinforced by a political commitment to an epistemology of overdetermination, neo-Marxism takes both the process of theory building as well as the theory itself as both political and productive acts. A productive act is one that creates reality in the post-structuralist sense of discourse and action producing, rather than merely reflecting or responding to, a reality that exists independent of our knowledge of it.

In *A Postcapitalist Politics*, Gibson-Graham (2006) elaborated on the process of doing research and politics from an anti-essentialist Marxist position. Such work begins by exploring the intersection of subjectivity and the economy. Inspired by Foucault's conception of power, they see progressive possibility and the production of social processes not in systemic, totalizing social relations, like

the Marxist conception of the "mode of production," but in everyday relations such as daily interactions and exchanges with family members, friends, and coworkers that cannot be understood as purely capitalist. They articulate a need for not only for "a differently theorized economy, but for new ethical *practices of thinking* economy and becoming different kinds of economic beings" (2006, xxviii). For them, such a practice would integrate a moral vision for what economic relations ought to be with how we produce knowledge about what the economy actually is. It would also include a reconceptualization of people as actors who play an active role in "producing the economy", and hence, capable of changing it through our day to day actions. This research included an exploration of alternative conceptions of the economy, as well as alternative economic practices. Through participatory action research, Gibson-Graham worked to de-center capitalism and its taken-for-granted assumption that community well-being and prosperity can best be realized through traditional capitalist economic development that is best attracted and retained through place-based incentives that pit location against location in order to attract footloose capital.

Through focus groups and action-research exercises, Gibson and Graham attempted to encourage residents of places that are traditionally understood as "deindustrialized" including the Pioneer Valley in Massachusetts and the Latrobe Valley in Victoria, Australia, to see themselves as empowered agents rather than passive subjects in the economic well being of their region. In one example, residents who took part in Gibson-Graham's research projects changed their conception of their deindustrialized region as one abandoned by capital, to a view of it as a vibrant place with a host of various economic relationships that were productive and fulfilling.

Participants also developed new priorities for place-making, which rejected the traditional view of the well-being of a place as grounded in economic development and the vibrancy of the capitalist economy, and

instead focused on the strengths and positive attributes of the place in more expansive terms. In the Latrobe Valley in Australia, this included a participatory action exercise in which trained community members interviewed their friends and relatives to identify what they considered to be the strengths of the region. The result was a portrait of a place with a host of important assets, including a strong network of volunteerism and a host of intellectual and physical skills. This narrative, according to Gibson-Graham (2006), was an alternative, or counter-narrative to the hegemonic, “capitalocentric” narrative that had constructed the Latrobe Valley as a typical deindustrializing region with little hope for economic development in the globalizing economy. Rather than centering around the imperatives of developing a place for capitalist economic development in the traditional sense, Gibson-Graham’s research participants re-imagined community well-being as realized through alternative economic relations such as volunteerism, gifting, and family labor in small businesses. By focusing on existing non-capitalist social relations, Gibson-Graham attempt both to deconstruct the capitalocentric social imaginary as well as to develop community visions that were not so heavily dependent on a capitalist script. Though they acknowledged the challenges produced by the near-total hegemony of the capitalist social imaginary, their research and activism is an exciting and promising direction for anti-essentialist, non-totalizing anti-capitalist politics and action.

CONCLUSION

The practice of producing knowledge and assigning it legitimacy is a political act. Theory building, especially that with progressive political aims, must be reflexive, deliberative, and in dialogue with diverse communities of knowers. Totalizing theories, which seek to explain and fully represent the social world, cannot accommodate the epistemic authority of multiple communities of knowers, and thus delegitimize other ways of knowing. In

so doing, such theories recreate oppressive tendencies and render “impossible” those who do not understand or experience their oppression or experiences of the world in similar terms.

At the same time, however, Marxist political economy provides an important tool for analysis and critique of capitalism and its implications for the social world. Marxists, such as David Harvey, have made compelling arguments for the importance of retaining a critique of capitalism in theoretical analysis. In so doing, however, they have created a totalizing, and thus problematic, theory. In Gibson, Graham, Resnick, and Wolff’s neo-Marxism, the Marxist critique of capitalism is retained, while space is simultaneously made for other accounts of the world. The result is a mode of theorizing in the spirit of Code’s ecological thinking in which both the content of the theory, and the practice of producing knowledge using the theory, have emancipatory potential.

NOTES

1. “Regime of accumulation” and “mode of regulation” are foundational concepts in Regulation Theory. Regime of accumulation refers to the consumption and production patterns that reinforce each other (ie, mass production/mass consumption under Fordism/Keynesianism). “Mode of regulation” refers to the norms, social network, governance arrangements, and organizational forms that reinforce, support, and smooth out a particular regime of production and consumption (ie, banking systems, labor markets, trade relations) (Jessop 1997).
2. See Jessop 1997 for an excellent overview of regulation theory, see Jenson 1991 and Gibson-Graham 1996, chapter 7 for a feminist-inspired critique. See also Purcell 2002 for a sympathetic engagement with the way in which regulation theory addresses non-class processes.
3. Hennessey (2000) has argued that holding class constant as an entry point precisely

because it provides a discursive intervention represents a tacit recognition of her central thesis that class has been subsumed as a mode of analysis. While Hennessey asserted that the historic repression of class as an entry point for analysis and critique are a testament to its primacy as an entry point with emancipatory potential, Resnick and Wolff and Gibson-Graham have generally avoided making that claim, and instead have argued class is one of many meaningful entry points.

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