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The Condition of Postmodernity (1989): David Harvey

Keith Woodward and John Paul Jones III

The experience of time and space has changed, the confidence in the association between scientific and moral judgements has collapsed, aesthetics has triumphed over ethics as a prime focus of social and intellectual concern, images dominate narratives, ephemerality and fragmentation take precedence over eternal truths and unified politics, and explanations have shifted from the realm of material and political-economic groundings towards a consideration of autonomous cultural and political practices. (Harvey, 1989: 328)

Introduction

David Harvey's (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* is more than a key text in geography: its popularity and significance is unmatched *outside* of the discipline. A few minutes with GoogleTM Scholar will affirm that no academic book discussed in this volume has been as widely cited as *Condition of Postmodernity*. For less systematic evidence, students need only visit the offices of professors who work in other fields; they'll often find that *Condition of Postmodernity* is the only book by a geographer on their shelves. The forcefulness of Harvey's argument led Terry Eagleton, the renowned Marxist literary theorist, to offer the following assessment, printed on the back cover of *Condition*:

Devastating. The most brilliant study of postmodernity to date. David Harvey cuts beneath the theoretical debates about postmodernist culture to reveal the social and economic basis of this apparently free-floating phenomenon. After reading this book, those who fashionably scorn the idea of a 'total' critique had better think again. (Eagleton, 1989: np)

But the book itself is only part of the story of its popularity. Another is that strange conjuncture of intellectual thought, cultural trends, economic transformations, and political developments that in the 1980s came to be known as 'postmodernism.' It is hard for those whose intellectual awakening came in the late 1990s or later to have a sense of that era – of the immediacy of opportunities and dangers it seemed to present – but consider this: for several hundred years something that came to be called 'modernity' developed apace. And then, like tracking the changing temperature of time itself, there emerged a widespread feeling that modernity's cherished moorings – a faith in human rationality and logical communication, in economic, political, and social progress, in science, technology, and aesthetic coherence, and in just and ethical systems of valuation and judgment – were being unhinged to such an extent that the world, especially the West, was entering a new era. Though Harvey draws on his always-keen geographical imagination in analyzing postmodernism, his account of these shifts goes to issues much larger than the discipline of geography, and this helps explain why his book has been so widely read. *Condition of Postmodernity* touched a chord to which academics of many stripes were attuned.

This essay on *Condition of Postmodernity* covers its argument, impact, and critical reception. But before we move forward, there are three preliminaries to address. First, *Condition of Postmodernity* is unlike the books by Harvey that immediately preceded (Harvey, 1982 – see Castree, [Chapter 8](#) this volume) and followed (Harvey, 1996) it, both of which he nearly abandoned in frustration, in that it nearly 'wrote itself.' Harvey reports that the writing came so

easily that it 'poured out lickety-split' (Harvey, 2002: 180). Harvey's previous work on the urbanization of capital, on the history of Second Empire Paris and modern Baltimore, and on space and time within dialectical materialism were foundational for *Condition of Postmodernity*. The book amplifies an analysis in a 1987 essay he published in the radical geography journal, *Antipode*, in which he argued, in line with an earlier essay by Fredric Jameson (1984), that 'post-modernity is nothing more than the cultural clothing of flexible accumulation' (Harvey, 1987: 279). That piece ended with a challenge befitting Harvey's intellectual debt to Marxism: 'A critical appraisal ... of the cultural practices of postmodernity ... appears as one small but necessary preparatory step towards the reconstitution of a movement of global opposition to a plainly sick and troubled capitalist hegemony' (Harvey, 1987: 283). It was Harvey's friend and long-time editor, John Davey, who persuaded him to make that appraisal.

A second thing to know is that *Condition of Postmodernity* – along with Jameson's denser but similarly minded *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) – greatly contributed to making its object of analysis passé. This is not to say that there were not already strong critics of postmodernism, and perhaps even a sense of intellectual and cultural exhaustion, by 1989. As Harvey (1989: ix) noted in his Preface: 'When even the developers tell an architect like Moshe Safdie that they are tired of it, then can [The philosophers] be far behind?' Harvey's own strategy was to *historicize*, *locate*, and *explain* postmodernism, and there are few things more disabling for a movement that fancies detached moorings. After *Condition*, as Eagleton noted, the *foundations* of an apparently free-floating phenomenon were established. Wind out of sails, the ship was grounded; postmodernism's themes live on, but under different banners.

Third, in our opinion *Condition of Postmodernity* should be read in conjunction with the text that followed it, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (1996). A much misunderstood book, *Justice* complements its predecessor: by specifying a suite of ontological questions that lay dormant in *Condition of Postmodernity*; by laying out in clear detail a dialectical analytic that underwrites Harvey's approach to explanation; and by responding to critics of *Condition of Postmodernity* by addressing its widely acknowledged sublimation of gendered and raced social relations. Harvey's *Justice* also presages the current interest by geographers and others in ethics and responsibility, and on how to theorize the relationship between culture (social life) and the natural environment. Whereas the book we describe here is largely critique, *Justice* helps readers understand more fully how that critique is grounded, while responding to lapses in some of *Condition of Postmodernity's* arguments.

In writing about postmodernism, Harvey once affirmed Pierre Bourdieu's injunction that, 'Every established order tends to produce the naturalization of its own arbitrariness' (quoted in Harvey, 1987: 279). For all its uncertainty, multiplicity, and disorderliness, the age of postmodernism was very nearly one of an 'established order.' It was Harvey's mission to unmask that naturalization. In the process, *Condition of Postmodernity* became part of the time–space conjunction it analyzed, further naturalizing the book as, in Eagleton's terms, devastating and brilliant.

The Argument

For many reasons, it is important to read *Condition of Postmodernity* as a text devoted principally to the critique of a system rather than the promotion of a coherent alternative. While it is undeniable that Harvey never strays from the project of spatializing the political

economy, a move that spans almost the entirety of his oeuvre, here the positive, revolutionary, and utopian aspects of Marxism are sent to the background, as something that sits behind, but nevertheless frames, the topic at hand. True to its title, the book provides a critical analysis of economic and cultural *conditions* specific to and definitive of the last quarter of the twentieth century. Importantly, Harvey recognizes that a double meaning hides within the idea of 'condition': it signals the state of actual, existing *things* surrounding us and making up the world but, at the same time, it also indicates the historical tendencies driving global *processes*. Put another way, 'condition' implies both the *condition of things* and *that which conditions things*. It is within this double formulation that surfaces the beginnings of the ontological development that will come to maturity in *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*: a condition is, at once, a state of Being *and* a process of Becoming.

Historically, the 'condition of postmodernity' is said to have developed out of (or to have been a break with) the vast collection of Western philosophical, artistic, and scientific theories that developed during the period known as 'modernism.' Though beginning with the Enlightenment, this historical era gained ground through the establishment of scientific positivism; the growth, spread, and techno-practical coherences of industrial capitalism; and the development of the democratic state form. These were in no way discrete historical events or processes; rather, each informed the other. Moreover, they helped map out a human-centered world aimed at the development of free and autonomous human agents: rational economic citizens naturally embracing science, capitalism, and democracy. By the mid-twentieth century, however, the ideals of modernity had been pushed into crisis by the increasingly glaring inequalities that accompanied the development of capitalism and by the ever-greater alienation fostered by the violence and devastation of the two World Wars. Artists, philosophers, and even scientists increasingly turned to fragmented, alienated, and relativistic representations of the world, revealing a growing dissatisfaction with appeals to the foundationalism that had been the cornerstone of modernist thinking.

Postmodernity met this discontent with several accounts of difference, positionality, and situatedness that appeared to ring the death-knell for aging visions of a world rooted in essentialism, totalization, and universality. One of the key moments in this transformation was Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) – from which Harvey's book derived its name and to which it serves as a response. Here, Lyotard called for a rejection of the 'grand narratives' of modernity, two of which were especially suspect in the postmodern critique: the assumed total autonomy of the individual (liberalist humanism, free market entrepre-neurialism), and the linear deterministic progression of history (Marxist socialism, scientific progress). Thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Lyotard argued that such notions did not reflect any necessity within reality or the 'nature' of things so much as the influence of power and discourse in the ways we know and understand the world (Dixon and Jones, 2004). Likewise, language, politics, and even identities became matters not of universals, but of particularity, contingency, and difference.

Given this apparent break with the foundations of modernity, what possibilities remain for the collective politics that Harvey and other Marxists find necessary for undermining capitalism? His solution was to hold his ground, reanalyzing the relation between modernity and postmodernity. He concludes that the latter, in fact, does not represent a break with the former, but rather its continuation, with changes marking adjustments to transformations in capitalist production and consumption. For Harvey, modernity is inseparable from the processes and institutions devoted to the accumulation of capital and the utilization of labor, reaching its point of inflection with the advent in 1914 of Fordism. Initiated by Henry Ford's introduction of the 'five dollar, eight hour day as recompense for workers manning the

automated car-assembly line he had established' (Harvey, 1989: 125), Fordism was sealed in the post-World War II era as a social compact among capitalists, labor unions, and the social welfare state. The macroeconomics of Fordism was globalized under the Bretton Woods agreement of 1944, which 'turned the dollar into the world's reserve currency and tied the world's economic development firmly into US fiscal and monetary policy' (Harvey, 1989: 136). Accompanying this agreement was the opening of global markets to American corporate interests, and eventually Fordism began to spread throughout the globe.

By the mid-1960s, however, a number of national and regional markets had arisen to challenge 'United States hegemony within Fordism to the point where the Breton Woods agreement cracked and the dollar was devalued' (Harvey, 1989: 141). Drawing from his earlier theories established in *Limits to Capital* (1982; see Castree, [Chapter 8](#) this volume), Harvey points to the unraveling of Fordism in the 1960s and 1970s: a system too rigid and contradictory to put off crises of over-accumulation, it was inexorably being supplanted by a new, post-Fordist or flexible form of accumulation. Flexibility was sectoral insofar as capital was moved to invest in service industries; it was technical in the shift toward more fluid labor agreements and outsourcing arrangements; and it was geographical in capitalism's ever demanding need to 'spatially fix' its crises by mobilizing in ways that lower costs, open new markets, and increase profits. Flexibility emphasized greater adventurism on the part of the capitalist through the production of mobile, short-lived commodities while, for the worker, whose own labor is sold as a commodity, this meant new forms of exploitation as promises of future employment were increasingly broken, which in turn fostered increased transience and 'nomadism' within the laboring class.

Critically, Harvey argues that, as the distances and times it took to accumulate capital and circulate commodities shrunk, our *experience* of space and time similarly compressed. What is more, postmodernity's rise at this juncture – as an intellectual, architectural, artistic, and cultural movement – was not coincidental, for the sea-change called postmodernism is the direct result of these experiential dislocations. So, while previous representations of postmodernity might have argued that the moment was fundamentally the product of *cultural* transformations (from which economic changes, like the rise of entertainment industries or the growth of gentrification, then followed), Harvey's analysis of the post-Fordist political economy turned this formulation upon its head. Making culture the shadow of economic processes, he explained in no uncertain terms that: 'the emphasis upon ephemerality, collage, fragmentation, and dispersal in philosophical and social thought *mimics* the conditions of flexible accumulation' (Harvey, 1989: 302, our emphasis). Harvey illustrates this causal reversal by examining key components of Western culture, drawing upon: (a) the recent history of the American city-scape, where he assesses several exemplary postmodern urban designs, including the spectacle-producing Disneyfication of Baltimore Harbor; and (b) the loss of depth, meaning, and history in art and aesthetics, echoing a widespread emphasis on 'the values and virtues of instantaneity ... and of disposability' (Harvey, 1989: 286) as capitalism moves from Fordist mass production to flexibility.

Perhaps the most jarring aspect of Harvey's argument is the suggestion that a great variety of developments in recent progressive politics – such as feminism, anti-racism, and queer activism – by virtue of their emphases upon an apparently relativistic politics of positionality, proceed in the spirit of these recent processes of capitalist development. Envisioning a postmodern identitarian politics that shares more commonalities with post-Fordist capitalism than with Marxist anti-capitalism (Harvey, 1989: 65), he suggests that postmodern strategies and argumentation drawn upon by identity politics after the cultural turn may be only *apparently* progressive:

... postmodernism, with its emphasis upon the ephemerality of *jouissance*, its insistence upon the impenetrability of the other, its concentration upon the text rather than the work, its penchant for deconstruction bordering on nihilism, its preference for aesthetics over ethics, takes matters too far. It takes them beyond the point where any coherent politics are left, while that wing of it that seeks a shameless accommodation with the market puts it firmly in the tracks of an entrepreneurial culture that is the hallmark of reactionary neoconservatism. (Harvey, 1989: 116)

Thus, while politics of positionality may seem progressive, Harvey asserts that such fragmented strategies are in fact openings for, if not inspired by, the equally fragmented practices of accumulation and production in contemporary capitalism and, importantly, their attendant transformations of the spaces that we daily encounter. In so arguing, Harvey makes the spaces and processes of post-Fordist capitalism the *conditions* for culturally inflected politics: 'Aesthetic and cultural practices are particularly susceptible to the changing experience of space and time precisely because they entail the construction of spatial representations and artifacts out of the flow of human experience. They always broker between Being and Becoming' (Harvey, 1989: 327).

The Impact of the *Condition of Postmodernity*

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, *Condition of Postmodernity* was widely read in many disciplines, and it has had a lasting impact. In geography, the book's most lasting mark ensued from Harvey's efforts to connect economic and cultural analysis. For many reasons that well predate the publication of *Condition of Postmodernity*, economic and cultural geography had largely developed independently of one another since the postwar period. The former grew in sophistication under the dual influence of both spatial scientific and Marxist theories (see Barnes, 1996; see Kelly, [Chapter 23](#) this volume) while the latter was either practiced as naive empiricism (e.g., cultural geographies of housetypes and the like) or developed inspiration from humanistic geography (e.g., Tuan, 1977; see Cresswell, [Chapter 7](#) this volume). Now, it is true that there is a history of linking economic and cultural phenomena in critical theory: one need only point to the base-superstructure model in Marxism, or to the efforts of thinkers such as E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, Theodore Adorno, and Stuart Hall, among others. But in geography at the time of *Condition's* publication, there were only a handful of geographers who were attempting, as Harvey was, to bring together the traditions of cultural interpretation and political economic analysis. Among the notables in this period was Denis Cosgrove, whose *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (1984 – see Gilbert, [Chapter 12](#) this volume) brilliantly wove together political, economic, and cultural analysis. And Harvey too was an early weaver of political economy and cultural interpretation in geography: one need only look at his now classic analysis of the political symbolism of the Basilica of Sacré-Coeur in Paris (Harvey, 1979).

In any event, the more general point is that however much Harvey would be later criticized for what were seen as one-sided readings of cultural texts (see below), and, for that matter, however much one might disagree with his assessment that economic change drives cultural responses, *Condition of Postmodernity* stands as a model effort to bring together two subfields largely separated due to their different objects of analysis (paintings versus factories) and the theories and methodologies typically brought to bear on them. In terms of analytic strategies, then, part of *Condition's* value comes from illustrating the connections between economy and culture.

Since its publication, economic and cultural geography have become much more closely aligned if not integrated, and while it is impossible to thread causality back to the book's appearance, *Condition of Postmodernity* must nonetheless be given its due. Today, many economic geographers actively embrace the subfield's 'cultural turn' by investigating – usually in dialectical fashion – the intersection between cultural forms and political-economic processes, often analyzing texts and visual media with the tools of content and discourse analysis favored by cultural geographers. Although quite different in their approach to the causal relations involved, we find this sort of analysis exemplified in the work of: Linda McDowell, who integrates cultural analysis, economic geography, and feminism in *Capital Culture: Gender at Work in the City* (1997); Nigel Thrift, who hones in on capitalism's own 'cultural circuit' in *Knowing Capitalism* (2005); and Allen Scott, whose *The Cultural Economy of Cities* (2000) examines the economic bases of the culture industries in Los Angeles and other world cities. This is not to say that *Condition* is responsible for the growth of representational or discursive analyses of the economy during the last decade of the twentieth century, for Harvey's own stance with respect to 'cultural political economy', as it is sometimes called, is clear enough. It is, rather, to point to the fact that however contentious economic geography's cultural turn has been, *Condition*, by virtue of its integration of economy and culture, opened up new territories in geography. Whether Harvey would approve of the circuitous routes taken to get to the intersection is, however, a different matter.

Critical Reactions

Of course, *Condition of Postmodernity* was not uniformly welcomed in geography, nor for that matter was it praised in all quarters of social and cultural theory. This is to be expected: geography, as this volume shows, is a highly differentiated and often contentious terrain, and many of the lines of conflict within the field are refractions of similar debates within theory more generally. At worst, there were geographers and others who, in claiming Harvey to *be* a postmodernist, demonstrated that they never read the book, much less its back cover. At its best, at the time of *Condition of Postmodernity's* appearance, two of the most important intellectual fault lines in critical geography (and elsewhere) were between what was perceived to be an overly structuralist, totalizing, and economistic Marxism (Duncan and Ley, 1982), on the one hand, and poststructuralism and feminism, on the other hand. These last two – which are related to but not subsumed by the more substantive tensions between economic and cultural geography, as discussed above – were sometimes overlapping critical injunctions that together provided a tense intellectual field for the reception of the book, and nowhere is this better illustrated than in two lengthy essays, one by Rosalyn Deutsche (1991) and one by Doreen Massey (1991), both of which drew on poststructuralist feminism to offer withering critiques.

Deutsche began her critique by accusing Harvey of relying on a masculinist and ocularcentric epistemology that unreflexively professes confidence in the ability to clearly grasp causal connections free of any complications that might be introduced by the viewer's social positionality. This 'totalizing' view, she maintained, underlies Harvey's deployment of a rigid Marxist analytic aimed at taming an unruly postmodernism filled with difference and possibility. It also explains his failure to recognize any limits in his perspective, as well as his lack of acknowledgement of both feminist work on postmodernism (not in any way an easy combination: see Nicholson, 1990) and feminist representational theory, particularly as it circulated within the domain of art. As for the latter, she offered a stinging criticism of Harvey's reading of the photographic self-portraits of artist Cindy Sherman: where Harvey saw in Sherman's many disguises evidence for a depthless postmodern fetishism, Deutsche read

them as critical commentaries on modernist artistic theories and their emphases on the individual artist and 'his' invocation of universal truths; for Deutsche, Sherman's portraits disrupted such authorial notions by pointing to the social construction of meaning in artistic representations, while simultaneously questioning the 'reality effect' of documentary photography. On this point Deutsche's poststructuralism departs from Harvey's geographic materialism, tapping into what had become a seemingly endless point-counterpoint between materiality and representation in the study of socio-spatial life (Dixon and Jones, 2004). As Deutsche had it:

Reality and representation mutually imply each other. This does not mean, as it is frequently held, that no reality exists or that it is unknowable, but only that no founding presence, no objective source, or privileged ground of meaning ensures a truth lurking behind representations and independent of subjects. Nor is the stress on representation a desertion of the field of politics ... any claim to know directly a truth outside representation emerges as an authoritarian form of representation employed in the battles to name reality. (Deutsche, 1991: 21)

Massey's (1991) critique echoes elements found in Deutsche's while redoubling on Harvey's limited engagement with feminist analyses of patriarchy. She begins by quoting a now famous question posed by Nancy Hartsock (1987): 'Why is it, exactly at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced [under modernism] begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes [under postmodernism] "problematic"?' (quoted in Massey, 1991: 33, brackets added). She locates the rise of the postmodern not, as Harvey does, within the coordinates of time-space compression, but in two opposing trends: progressive political activity marshaled around difference 'in fields such as feminist studies, ethnic studies, and Third World studies' (Massey, 1991: 34), and the competitive jostling for position among career minded academics. On balance, however, Massey offers a more hopeful, feminist reading of postmodernism, while at the same time affirming a commitment to retaining 'strong aspects of what characterises the modernist project, most particularly its commitment to change, hopefully progressive' (Massey, 1991: 52). Nonetheless, modernity cannot be let off the hook:

... the experience of modernism/modernity as it is customarily recorded, the production of what are customarily assumed to be its major cultural artefacts, and even its customary definition, are all constructed on and are constructive of particular forms of gender relations and definitions of masculinity and of what it means to be a woman. This is not ('just') to say that modernism was or is patriarchal (this would hardly be news, nor differentiate it from many other periods in history); it is to say that it is not possible fully to understand modernism without taking account of this. To return more directly to Harvey, modernism is about more than a particular articulation of the power relations of time, space, and money. (Massey, 1991: 49)

The following year, Harvey (1992) responded to both Deutsche and Massey (but, significantly, writing in the radical geography journal, *Antipode*, and not in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, the journal in which their critiques appeared). He began by acknowledging his regret for not integrating more feminist work into *Condition*, noting that, had he done so, the argument would have been strengthened rather than diluted. But Harvey largely stuck to his guns, employing his own differencing strategy whereby Deutsche's and Massey's analyses were particularized as emerging from one type of feminism, and not the one that suited his theory. In brief, Harvey has much more in common with the socialist feminism of Nancy Hartsock (1987) than with the post-structuralist feminism of Deutsche, and

his response is at pains to point out the dangers of what he perceives as a relativistic feminism that, while addressing difference, lacks the strong evaluative criteria to distinguish between socially and politically important axes of identification and insignificant ones: 'Lacking any sense of the commonalities which define difference, Deutsche is forced to adopt an undifferentiated, homogenizing, a-historical and in the end purely idealist notion of difference ...' (Harvey, 1992: 310). The charge of idealism, moreover, runs through Harvey's dismissal of Deutsche's poststructuralism:

Deutsche may find my view that there are social processes at work which are real unduly limiting, but I find ... the view that all understanding is preconstituted, not with reference to a material world of social processes but with reference to media images and discourses about that world, not only even more limiting but downright reactionary since it leaves us helpless victims of discourse determinism. (Harvey, 1992: 316)

Harvey was even less sympathetic to Massey's essay, accusing her in an obviously angry response of invoking a 'flexible feminism' in what he saw as a personal and opportunistic attack based on the fallacious assumption (technically, a circumstantial *ad hominem*) that 'whatever the male gaze lights upon is bound to be given an exclusively masculine and therefore sexist reading' (Harvey, 1992: 317).

Conclusion

In this chapter we have discussed the arguments in, impact of, and responses to *Condition of Postmodernity*. Each has circulated around issues of *content*; that is, they pivot on Harvey's analysis of modernity's passage to postmodernity, flexible accumulation's role in time–space compression, the role of class relative to other aspects of social difference, and the proper theorization of economy and culture. Another way to approach the book is through its 'mode of explanation': how does Harvey's analysis *work*? To answer that question we turn in this conclusion to the topic of ontology: theories of what the world is like, how it operates, and how as a consequence we might understand and explain it.

At the outset, it is important to emphasize that discussions of ontology are never far removed from the politics of research more generally, and this is nowhere more apparent than in critical geography, which is currently engaged in a spirited debate over the status of 'leftist' thinking within the field. On the one hand, these debates are about differences in and commitments to leftist thought with respect to the theory and praxis needed to move forward, that is, to confront and potentially overturn contemporary capitalism. On the other hand, they express deep-seated differences in ontology, and in particular between the dialectical approach of critical realism and various strains of anti-essentialist poststructuralism.

Critical realists (Sayer, 1992) hold that events are caused through the operation of necessary and contingent forces. These are theorized as embedded within a depth ontology, wherein more general causal forces (e.g., capitalism) are said to work in conjunction with contingent and contextually bound ones (e.g., local political culture, the particulars of context-specific gender relations). Harvey's book offers an example of a depth ontology, as time–space compression is positioned as a mediating mechanism between the underlying structural forces of capitalism and the resulting, surface level cultural forms of intellectual trends, art and architecture, and politics. *Condition of Postmodernity*, while not explicitly referencing critical realism, demonstrates its explanatory power, and while critical realism is not by necessity Marxist, it nevertheless complements Harvey's historical-geographic materialist

analysis because of its focus on internal rather than external relations among social phenomena (Sayer, 1992).

By contrast, poststructuralists reject the notion of the structuring systems that characterize depth ontology. Either the world is 'overdetermined' (Gibson-Graham, 1996), a model in which causal forces are so mutually co-constituted that they are theoretically inseparable, or reality is itself always once removed through thought and language, and thus by the processes of categorization that name and organize the world. In both forms, poststructuralists in the 1990s came to argue on behalf of theoretical agnosticism with respect to ontology, preferring instead to prioritize epistemology, that is, how we come to know the world rather than what makes up the world. Quite simply, these authors – of whom Deutsche (1991) is a good example – maintain that epistemology 'trumps' ontology (Dixon and Jones, 2004). It should be clear that Harvey has little patience for this group of theorists.

More recently, however, numerous poststructuralists using various versions of affect theory, actor-network theory, non-representational theory, and site ontology, have reasserted the importance of materialist ontological analysis (see, for example, Geoforum, 2004). Although Harvey will be bemused to see himself described in parallel with these trends, he nevertheless shares an affinity with them by virtue of his longstanding dedication to an ontology framed by historical-geographical materialism. In this sense, to the extent that one outcome of the post-postmodern era is a vital and renewed engagement with ontology, then one of this book's lasting legacies will have been its showcasing of the limits of a postmodernism preoccupied by epistemology and discourse.

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- postmodernity
- ontologies
- postmodernism
- cultural geography
- geography
- Fordism
- economic geography

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