GEOGRAPHIES, CRITICAL AND MARXIST, AND LESSONS FROM SOUTH AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

The human geography mainstream, it now seems fair to conclude, is dominated by what has come to be known as ‘critical human geography.’ It now prevails across a number of prominent journals like *Geoforum*, *Society and Space*, and *Cultural Geographies* and has made substantial inroads into others like *Political Geography*, and the flagship journals of the *Annals* and the *Transactions*. Only in the more purely economic geography journals has its influence been less in evidence. The *Dictionary of Human Geography* bears clear testimony to this hegemony.

It was not, of course, always thus. It began to emerge towards the end of the nineteen ’seventies piggybacking on some elements of the earlier work of Marxist geographers but also seeking some critical distance from it. It is that critical distance that is the focus of the current paper; a focus whose significance is reinforced by the now all-but pervasive influence of critical human geography. While it is true that some radical geographers of Marxist persuasion have seen themselves as falling under what they see as a big umbrella, its center of gravity is quite alien. It can also be argued that from a Marxist standpoint it is also unsatisfactory.

Accordingly, the first section of this paper outlines four major tendencies in the way in which critical human geographers see the world: these are its predominantly distributional focus; its methodological pluralism; a concern with relationality; and a suspicion of the universalizing which, in its turn, leads to an emphasis on the particularizing. An examination of Marx’s method suggests not just the limitations of this but also the way it has been seriously misunderstood. Processes of totalization do not mean a determinism, even more dubious, an economic determinism. Nor does it signify a rejection of the particularizing, even while it is a particularizing moment that is subordinated to the universalizing.

The tensions between critical human geography and what Harvey has called historical geographical materialism are, inevitably enough, very clear in the way they approach two of the field’s key concepts, those of space and place. In a penultimate section this contrast is drawn out through an examination of representative figures: Doreen Massey and David Harvey. The visions are by no means mutually exclusive but again, it is a matter of a contribution that is essentially particularizing serving to fill out one where that particular moment is a subordinate one. Specifically it will be argued that Massey’s claims regarding the particularity of place and how it is constituted widen our understanding of Harvey’s structured coherences.

How this all comes together is then illustrated, as the final part of the paper, through a case study. All places are particular, of course, but some have seemed more particular, if not downright peculiar than others. In recent memory that applies to South Africa for much of its history. Just how it emerged, how it was indeed constituted by a highly heterogeneous mix of influences and conditions but within the context of the logics of the accumulation process forms brings into focus points made earlier in the paper; not least the fruitfulness of a totalizing approach to understanding that can embrace all the moments of the social process, even while they are in tension one with another so that particular concrete outcomes are never inevitable.
SOME SYMPTOMATIC TENDENCIES

Critical human geography has four features of critical human geography that are defensibly defining. These are its distributional focus; its pluralism; the rejection of so-called ‘grand narratives’; and a concern with relationality. But at the start we should also note the huge variety of writings falling under this heading and exhibiting these particular tendencies, taking in the concerns of all the classic systematic fields as well as new ones like political ecology, and some of those writings more theoretically informed and sensitive than others.

1. Questions of Distribution: There is for a start, and as befits to some degree, an approach defining itself as ‘critical’, an insistent concern with questions of distribution and therefore inequality. This can embrace a huge variety of topics including environmental racism, gentrification, conflicts around access to resources, particularly in developing countries, the inequalities resulting from different positions in geographic divisions of labor, and uneven development at all manner of geographic scales; and there again, how they affect particular groups defined in terms of identities or interests – women, African-Americans, the disabled, the colonized, and so on. In fact, of course, gender and race have attracted major attention, along with their characteristic geographies: workplace / home place, boardroom / office, metropole / colony or post-colony and so on. In this regard the social movements of the ’70s provided a major impetus towards the development of critical human geography. Their goals were almost entirely distributional, embracing not just the material but also social recognition and this is reflected in critical human geography.

2. Pluralism: There is then an explanatory framework of a pluralistic sort, sometimes opposing itself explicitly to Marxism, though what gets emphasized can clearly vary a great deal depending on the topic to hand: so, among others, markets, commodity chains, structures of gender and race relations, state policy, forms of governance, institutions, power relations – all aspects of the social process, to be sure, but treated on the whole as separate one from another and having their own causal powers. The tendency, for instance, is to see race, gender and class as autonomous in their causal powers. From one standpoint there is not much new here; it sounds like human geography up until the emergence of the Marxist work in the early ’70s. What is new, what has been added to the explanatory corpus and in some instances taken it over completely, is the emphasis on representation. This takes shape in multiple, related ways, including an enhanced interest in discourses and imaginaries and identity as an explanatory force: the way in which discourse subjectifies, therefore. Positionality and its implications have acquired increased significance: the dominance of the representations of the classically white, Western investigator, sometimes genderized, with all of its taken-for-granted assumptions about the world. From this standpoint all geographical knowledge is provincial and to be contested by alternative views: ‘the view from the global South’, the view of the colonized, and of all the subordinated and insufficiently-heard-from.

This has been an essential aspect of a broader shift in the center of gravity of critical studies in human geography from the material to the ideal. Identities have encroached on interests, and as if they could be considered separately from one another. There is also the ‘power relations’ that figure so prominently: a variable mix of the discursive and the material – varying, that is, from something loosely referred to as ‘political economy’ to ‘power-knowledge’ and often stated in underspecified often cryptic ways, the only unity coming from the implication of some concept of ‘fairness’ or ‘social justice.’

1 Compare Castree and Wright in their editorial statement for Antipode in 2005 (Vol 37, 1-8.) which is all the more remarkable considering that journal’s history: “… the journal subscribes to no one orthodoxy: it is politically non-sectarian and intellectually pluralist. Long gone are the days of its close association with Marxian political economy or certain modalities of feminist geography. Antipode is today an ecumenical journal, a fact that reflects the necessary widening of Left thinking in recent years as much as its fragmentation.” (p.3.)
3. **Particularity:** Claims to universality generate intense anxiety, even suspicion. Post-modernism and subsequent anxieties about ‘grand narratives’ and positionality have induced an emphasis on the particular. The implications for research have varied. For some it has seemed to be a matter of qualification; thus Paul Robbins: “To avoid mistakes of reductionism, it (political ecology) must operate less from the universal and more from the particular, explore the context as well as the conditions of power, and eschew any simple narratives of social difference rooted in single-variable explanations. All the same, it must do so with a serious dedication to the material underpinnings of social life.” (p.50.) This recalls the earlier interest in critical realism and the conjoining of the necessary and the contingent; a less radical, because more materialist, critical human geography, therefore. For others, like Doreen Massey and her own distinctive case against ‘grand narratives’, it has been hard to find anything beyond the contingent. Geography, the very possibility of the intersection, juxtaposition of different conditions, influences, stories, provides the condition for new stories, new structures of social relations, new worlds that we cannot possibly anticipate. The future, or rather the future time-space, is open, and not closed and so scripted according to some ‘grand narrative.’ This has major implications about how we think about place and space.

4. **Relationality:** Within these pluralistic and particularizing limits, there is then a high degree of sensitivity to questions of relationality, as in fact in Doreen Massey’s understandings of place and geographic variation tout court. Originally, and going back to the emergence of critical human geography at the beginning of the 1980s, this stemmed from a critical interest in dualisms: structure and agency, state and economy, society and space, colonizer / colonized, gender, people and nature. The critical riposte has taken the form of an emphasis on the mutual conditioning of what has been opposed and split apart: of mutual enabling or interpenetration so that neither side of the opposition makes any sense without taking into account the other either materially, discursively or (hopefully) both. This is not, therefore, the exclusive and excluding positivist assumption of externality, of ‘things-in-

themselves.’ Rather mutual constitution and presupposition have become central and thoroughly defensible ingredients of the critical dispensation. It has been, though, a recognition with important limits: one in which explanation proceeds without reference to what conditions their separation to begin with and which lies beyond the terms that make up the duality. In other words, or so it would appear, a commitment to pluralism and particularity has its price.

**MARX, METHOD AND CRITICAL HUMAN GEOGRAPHY**

Critical human geography was primarily a reaction to what were seen as deficiencies of the Marxist work that had emerged in the early 1970s; ‘primarily’ because there were also lingering anxieties about the positivism of the 1960s – something particularly evident in the interest generated by critical realism. As such it began to take shape towards the end of the ‘70s, molded in part by what were known as humanistic geography and its embryonic antagonism to Marxist geography. If there were signal events they would be the paper by Duncan and Ley that through its critique of Marxist geography articulated a lot of the concerns then in the air, and more positively the creation of the new journal *Society and Space* in 1983.

The Duncan and Ley paper had appeared one year earlier, entitled “Structural Marxism and Human Geography: A Critical Assessment” and bore strongly the imprint of humanistic geography. The approach was to identify certain one-sided approaches to the world with what was called ‘structural Marxism’ and in opposition to what was being left out, which was where humanistic geography came in. The ‘structural’ Marxism supposedly then in fashion had neglected agency and culture. Class had been privileged over ethnicity or gender. Culture was a faint echo of the economic, if present at all. On the other hand, the paper did reflect growing concerns about gender and race to which Marxist geography, it was believed had been relatively impermeable.

Derek Gregory, who would be a member of the editorial board of *Society and Space* thought these claims misconceived and unfair (1994: 107-108.) Nevertheless the paper contained much that
would resonate among those who saw the need for the new journal, inspired as they were by the desire to gain some critical distance from Marxism. So while historical materialism had been the critical theory of the ’seventies, this was believed to be unhealthy. Theory was too important in any science, the human sciences included. And in a number of respects historical materialism did not meet the challenge. In part this reflected some of the issues that Duncan and Ley had touched on, though suitably reworked and thought through, and more general concerns in the human sciences as a whole.

One of these was the supposed dualism of structure and agency; a debate raging towards the end of the ’70s and, ironically, stoked by the attack of the Marxist, Edward Thompson (1978) on Althusser. There was also sympathy for the economistic claim: historical materialism downplayed other dimensions of human experience. Feminist geography was more than a straw in the wind, implying, in its reference to gender roles, that there might be other structures of relations than those of capital and at the same level of abstraction.² (Foord and Gregson 1986.)

Finally, ‘society and space’ would be added to the growing list of dualisms that Marxist geography had supposedly ignored. Space had, after all, been the all-consuming passion of the spatial-quantitative revolution. With the turn to Marxist geography and social relevance something seemed to have been lost. Social relations clearly conditioned geographies in a very general sense: with capitalism living places were separated from workplaces with the result that politics too bifurcated into a politics of the living place and one of the workplace. But how might space condition social relations and how could the two sides be put together in some sort of relationship that was non-deterministic?³ Only with the appearance of Harvey’s Limits to Capital did things become clearer, but by then ‘society and space’ and the very different commitments and arguments that it would entail was well underway.

In short, the moves to a more pluralist position and a critical concern with dualisms that would be, nevertheless, conserved within a more global pluralist framing, were clear early on. Issues of structuralism, economism, determinism, would then be brought together under the heading of the sin of totalization: something to be given additional impetus later on as post-modernism and anxieties about grand narratives entered the fray. Meanwhile, and with very, very little comment, production seemed to have lost its centrality.

A careful examination of the concept of totality shows just how suspect these claims are, even while at the time Marxist geographers had some difficulty coming to terms with them. We should consider here just what totalization meant for Marx; something that David Harvey has worked on over the last twenty years in some signal contributions (1996: Chapter 4; 2009: 236-247; and 2010: Chapter 5) though, it would seem, with only limited effect on the critics. There are several points to note here:

1. First, it is a conception of the social process as driven by strong tendencies to coherence, towards some sort of order,

² This is an argument that would be elaborated later in Foord and Gregson (1986.)
³ Compare Massey (1985: 12): “The focus of the radical critique of the 1970s was far less on the huge variety of outcomes we see in the world around us than in unraveling their common underlying cause. The argument on the whole was not just that spatial patterns are caused by social processes, but that they are caused by common social processes ... My
even if it is an order that is for some and not all. It is crucially an order that encounters contradictions internal to itself. It constantly threatens to break apart, inciting repeated attempts at reconstruction. Totalizing is never ending and totality an elusive if ever sought goal.

2. It is a process that starts with and always returns to production. Nothing else can happen until means of subsistence and the means of production for securing that subsistence are in place. Only in that context can a society emerge, a division of labor, agreed on means of signification, and particular ways of relating to nature, including one’s own. Production is at the heart of it. Under capitalism it assumes the very specific form of the production of values. This is the essential means to the end of accumulation; values are produced in order to produce more values on an expanding scale. The use values necessary to physical reproduction have to be produced on a correspondingly increased scale, but that production is now subordinate to their status as values.

3. The different forms of social relation, institutional, property, power, division of labor, the relation to nature, technologies, beliefs and desires, space, are all to an important if not exclusive degree, production relations: facilitative of production and under capitalism, of the accumulation process. Coherence, though, is constantly threatened generating new re-totalizing tendencies. In part this is a result of capital’s own contradictions as the accumulation process tends to undermine its conditions of existence: so resistance to the commodification that threatens labor’s life world; or to the ecological disturbances that accumulation leaves in its wake. It bears emphasis that the concrete form in which any contradiction is posed depends on geohistory, on the circumstances of time and place and how they have been constituted in what Giddens would call processes of time-space distanciation, and how that geohistory is understood and drawn on in the ongoing struggle. In part, though, it is a result of changes that seemingly have little to do with the trajectory of capitalist development: how the working class chooses to spend its leisure time; biological mutations; the development of the natural sciences in an ever threatened ‘ivory tower.’ This does not mean, though, that careful empirical work to establish the connections or lack of them with the course of capitalist development is not required.

Production is at the center. The sort of distributional questions that the critical human geographers agonize about, have to be placed in that context. Distribution is first and foremost distribution of the means of production. Without changing that there can be no lasting solution to social inequalities in access to means of subsistence, to housing, transport, decent schools and health care, recreation, and healthful environments. Under capital the unequal distribution of access to the means of production, the creation of a class that monopolizes productive property on the one hand, and on the other, a class that has nothing to sell but its labor power, gets reproduced and deepened. The division between capital’s fund for accumulation and labor’s consumption fund is so regulated as to curb working class pretensions. The production of an industrial reserve army is an essential aspect of this.

But if this is a necessary precondition for the functioning of capital and for the accumulation process, so too are other aspects or moments of society: the state, technology, discourse, and so on – so many relations of production that, like the division between capital’s fund for accumulation and labor’s consumption fund have to be regulated. The industrial reserve army functions as effectively as it does because of the differential social values assigned to being in wage work, and not; nobody wants to be a ‘welfare scrounger.’ The capitalist form of the state takes shape in the wake of all the other, now taken-for-granted changes that capitalism elicits. Not least among these are the ideological shifts towards what Marx described as ‘the realm of Freedom, Equality,
Property and Bentham’ (1867: 280), its reconstitution as part of the social division of labor; and there again, along with its own technologies mimicking those that capital had shown to be so effective and which would become the object of much of Foucault’s work.

This in turn gives a new meaning to relationality: one that is all-embracing, historical and materialist. As Marx wrote in the Introduction to his Grundrisse:

“The more deeply we go back into history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole: in a still quite natural way in the family and in the family expanded into the clan; then later in the various forms of communal society arising out of the antitheses and fusions of the clan. Only in the eighteenth century, in ‘civil society’, do the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, as external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is also precisely that of the hitherto most developed social (from this standpoint, general) relations.” (p.84)

This statement is of particular interest given the attention once devoted by the critical human geographers to the question of structure and agency. Here Marx exposes the historicity of the dualism while at the same time bringing its illusory quality to light. In the same section of the book Marx tackles other dualisms, including distribution and production, exposing their own historicity and their deceptiveness: a distinguishing feature of his method.4

We experience the world as fragmented, as divided into numerous parts, each with some sort of causal power of its own, autonomous from the rest, which is what makes pluralistic approaches to the world so persuasive (Callinicos 1998.) But as in Marx’s remarks about individual and society this sense of fragmentation is an historical creation. What had been experienced in pre-capitalist social forms as an internality, a necessary unity with others and with the natural conditions of production, now gets experienced as something external: a world of indifferently relating parts, even while underneath this world of appearances, the necessary unities are being re-forged, as indeed they have to be if production is to continue; the ‘external necessity’ that Marx refers to above. Critical human geography has an understanding of relationality, therefore, but it is a very partial one: dualisms taken separately as so many islands of relationality to be discovered rather than expressions of something that is not only historic but a chronic society-wide condition. The attempt to suture up the relations between class, race and gender in the idea of intersectionality is symptomatic of the confusion.

This conception of totality also sheds a different light on the vexed question of particularity. It should be clear that we are not talking about the sorts of determinism – technical, economic or whatever – of which Marx has been so frequently accused. There is a strong element of contingency, of unpredictability in the course of capitalist development. Its concrete trajectory is something that cannot be run off from or ‘reduced to’ capital’s determinants. Capital does have its universals. There has to be accumulation and that means that the conditions for it have to be reproduced. But how they are reproduced, through what new configurations of the division of labor, through what gets produced and the transformations that those new products bring in their wake, and indeed through what transformations of space, cannot be anticipated. Particularity has to be part of how capital is appropriation of nature, which requires explanation or is the result of a historic process, but rather the separation between these inorganic conditions of human existence and this active existence, a separation which is completely posited only in the relation of wage labor and capital.” (p.489)

4 Consider also his remarks about people and nature and the material basis for their separation in thought – a very different way of handling the people/environment dualism: “The individual relates simply to the objective conditions of labor as being his: [relates] to them as the inorganic nature of his subjectivity, in which the latter realizes itself …” (p.485); and: “It is not the unity of living and active humanity with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolic exchange with nature, and hence their
theorized, including its spatial moments. But that in turn puts it in a clear opposition to how it has been thought about in critical human geography.

THE QUESTION OF SPACE

In this regard, Doreen Massey’s contribution to how we think about space has been of major significance. It brings together much that is central to the thinking of critical human geographers but in a highly imaginative way. While there are strong criticisms to be made there are also some important lessons. Much of this will be already familiar to readers so the review here is quite cursory.

Always a strong advocate of the spatial imagination, her more recent point of departure was the way in which space and place have been imagined in the so-called ‘grand narratives’ emerging in the Enlightenment and afterwards. In an unevenly developed world ‘place’ is conceived as a stage in a universal process; as expressing a particular stage in development, in the transition from tradition to modernity, perhaps or more recently in the process of integration into the global economy. These are claims that have worked to the advantage of those who have mobilized ideas of development or globalization as progressive and therefore as desirable, and which, on those grounds alone, generate suspicion. What she has wanted to do, while placing herself firmly in opposition to these universalizing narratives is to imagine places not as a function of such stages moving towards an inevitable conclusion, but of time-space conceived in more particularizing terms: every place has its own distinct possibilities. Her focus has been on the particularity of places and on the irreducible specificity of the time-space juxtapositions which condition it. In brief, places, rather than formed and transformed by universal processes, are constituted by influences and conditions of a highly concrete nature and to adopt Giddens’ term, ones that are variably distanciated in time-space.

Technologies, people, cultures, ideas, narratives, economic policies, come together so that places can be conceived as what they truly are – as combinations, as emergent, a result of interventions and interactions to yield hybrid forms.

How this conception might work out has been evident in some of her more empirical work. The central idea of a juxtaposition of different forces and conditions in time-space has been especially evident in her work on regions and cities: earlier the study of Southeast England and latterly of London in her book World City. In the former case regional identity has been cemented through the emergence of the Southeast as England’s growth region par excellence: a combination of the boost to the City of London and its financial service industry by deregulation in the 1980s; the growth of hi-tech to the west and north of London, stretching out to embrace Oxford and Cambridge; the stimulus given to consumption by credit card debt made possible by the growth of income in the area; all on top of London’s historic role as seat of government and transport hub.

As a world city London is conceived in similar ways: a coming-together of diverse forces, then molded to narrow purposes by those able to draw on dominant ‘power relations.’ In her accounting London is a neo-liberal city that has worked effectively with prewar advantages of dominance in financial services, and with a quite stark uneven development in the country as a whole that has facilitated the draining of talent towards the capital; all then to be defined and advanced through the imaginary of the global city, pulling in wealth from the rest of the world and irrigating the rest of the country – an ungrateful country it would seem – through its taxes.

One aspect of her work on science parks has been an exploration of the historic preconditions for what she called ‘elite, exclusive, masculinized spaces of the production (and protection) of knowledge’ (1997: 27): in other words, how a particular contribution to a genderized geographic division of labor came to be. The emergence of the monastery as an exclusively male preserve designed to protect the Christian church’s monopoly of knowledge turns out to be a crucial step along the way.

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5 This is a more developed position from one she argued earlier in which particularity was the result of the combination of different positions in successive geographic divisions of labor. At least there the universal in the form of a geographic division of labor seemed to play a role.

6 One aspect of her work on science parks has been an exploration of the historic preconditions for what she called ‘elite, exclusive, masculinized spaces of the production (and protection) of knowledge’ (1997: 27): in other words, how a particular contribution to a genderized geographic division of labor came to be. The emergence of the monastery as an exclusively male preserve designed to protect the Christian church’s monopoly of knowledge turns out to be a crucial step along the way.
In many ways the central tendencies of critical human geography are clearly on display: the concern with particularity, with inequalities, the foregrounding of spatial imaginaries and recourse to rather inchoate ‘power relations’ but with a very definite originality. This originality in turn suggests linkages to other lines of thinking that might further deepen our understanding of space and place. The emphasis on juxtapositions of conditions and forces in time-space recalls the idea of assemblages, though to my knowledge Massey never used the term. More alien to her way of thinking because of its universalizing character, is Trotsky’s uneven and combined development: the combination, that is, of contradictory forces as in the case that intrigued Trotsky – the emergence of islands of industrial capitalist enterprise in the still dominantly feudal sea that was pre-revolutionary Russia. Harvey has discussed similar disjunctures between his activity spheres though not in the sort of time-space context that Massey foregrounds.

And indeed Harvey’s approach has been quite different. It is one that embraces both the universal and the particular but in which the latter is a subordinated moment. The focus has been on how the accumulation process unfolds over space: mobilizing it, transforming it, incorporating is as a moment of its own process, generating contradictions that then provide the basis for further change. Capital has agglomerated and concentrated providing centers of accumulation. It has also diffused, integrating places into new geographic divisions of labor, pushing back the boundary with pre-capitalist formations, and creating ever newer points of growth. But in its spatial moment capital has encountered contradiction, between concentration and dispersion for sure, but also between fixity and mobility: the fixity of concrete production and of capital in its more mobile forms – money, commodity capital and the variable capital of labor power as it moves around. These include the various physical infrastructures: premises, certainly, but also shared ones like the transportation network, the electricity supply, and worker housing. There are the social infrastructures, comprising in part the various relations into which capitals and workers enter in order to reproduce themselves: relations between one firm and another, among the workers, along with vehicles for the governance of the employment relationship. A division of labor appropriate to the particular constellation of firms emerges. This then affects consumption patterns, the housing market and public provision. As Harvey put it when talking about urban regions:

“The class relation between capital and labor tends, under the conditions described, to produce a ‘structured coherence’ of the economy of an urban region. At the heart of that coherence lies a particular technological mix – understood not simply as hardware but also as organizational forms – and a dominant set of social relations. Together these define models of consumption as well as of the labor process. The coherence embraces the standard of living, the qualities and style of life, work satisfactions (or lack thereof), social hierarchies (authority structures in the workplace, status systems of consumption) and a whole set of sociological and psychological attitudes toward working, living, enjoying, entertaining, and the like.”

(p.140)

One way of thinking about it is as a totality of the different activity spheres which Harvey outlined later, but a highly particularized one, unique to a city, region, or country: a set of production relations, therefore, on which ongoing accumulation comes to depend, which is slow to transform, non-portable, and hard to replicate elsewhere. This is significant because it will inevitably be threatened as some firms seek more congenial production conditions elsewhere, as technological change makes others obsolete, all viewed against the background of a delicate balance of class forces; or alternatively as new arrivals threaten to upset the local class compromise – the branch plants of unionized firms, immigrants with a more radical background.

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7 The affinity has been noted elsewhere. See Anderson, Kearnes, McFarlane and Swanton (2012.)
The problem is that some material interests can be significantly dependent on the future of a particular, localized structured coherence. These can include not just the firms which are left high and dry by the departure of a major customer and which would themselves find it hard to relocate. There is also local government which depends for its revenues on a continuing flow of value through its jurisdiction and a working class embedded in kinship relations, dependent on highly informal job markets or invested in homeownership—all spatially trapped, therefore, if in various ways. In other words, mobility in its different forms— inward and outward investment, the changing sourcing patterns of retailers, shifting migration patterns—stand to undermine a structured coherence put together over a long period of time, hard to rework and for many, hard to escape from, even if they wanted to. Mobility encounters fixity. The upshot then is the emergence of coalitions of forces that come together to defend an existing structured coherence or to reorganize local class relations prefatory to some reworking of it: a geopolitics of capitalism that works at all manner of geographic scales, much indeed as does Massey’s spatial politics.

And there are other points of overlap. They are to be sure, very different arguments. Massey’s is irredly particularizing, even while she is forced to make use of some universals like ‘power relations.’ For Harvey the universal lies elsewhere in capital’s inner nature: the law of value, the struggle between a capitalist class and a working class, the commodification of everything, accumulation, contradiction. But in Harvey, there is an explicit attempt to combine the particularizing with the universal, to acknowledge, even while the former is the subordinate moment. For ‘structured coherences’ are highly specific: if they weren’t, if one could be French anywhere in the world then what happens in France would be less important to the French. Could there be, therefore, some complementarity between Massey and Harvey: through her emphasis on time-space juxtapositions of highly concrete influences and conditions we have a way of understanding at least the basis on which structured coherences get constructed; the raw-materials that get fashioned into something that can facilitate the accumulation process; and by the same token a way of understanding how structured coherences gets undermined as what is available, what can be pulled in from elsewhere changes permitting, perhaps, shifts in the balance of class forces?

The argument can be pursued further. Harvey has recently referred to regions as ‘assemblages.’ This is interesting not just because of the use of the term itself but also because it suggests some convergence on Massey’s ideas about time-space juxtaposition but ultimately I think it misleading. The idea, to the degree that one can distill something general from the quite variable ways in which it has been used (Anderson, Kearnes, McFarlane and Swanton 2012), has some clear attractions. Its qualified relationality is entirely at one with the notion of unity-in-contradiction at the heart of Marxist understandings of totality and therefore Marx’s method of moments as outlined by Harvey (2009: 236-247.) Its emphasis on dynamics – processes of composition and decomposition – resonates in a similar way. It is also radically particularist emphasizing the geohistorical contingency of assemblages, providing an obvious insight to understanding the ways in which structured coherences get formed.

The danger, and it is absolutely crucial, is one of retreat into a flat ontology. The conditions of a capitalist society and its tensions are fundamental to the way assemblages get formed. Assemblages are supposed to have emergent powers but exactly why, without appeal to depth ontology, is unclear. Not everything that gets juxtaposed, is juxtaposed in an unplanned way. Rather it is a result of interventions as indeed Massey recognized in some of the ways she drew on her ideas of power relations: a purposeful structuring of comings together as people reached out, drew in, or blocked off in order to fulfill agendas.

8 “Geographical space is always the realm of the concrete and the particular. Is it possible to construct a theory of the concrete and the particular in the context of the universal and abstract determinations of Marx’s theory of capitalist accumulation? This is the fundamental question to be resolved” (1985: 144.)

9 Something implicit in earlier incarnations of her thinking. See NLR.
Rather the contribution of assemblage to a historical materialist understanding of space is the way it provides insight into particular distributions and juxtapositions of things, events, ideas, and forces which are then drawn on in the construction, reproduction and reconstruction of structured coherences. In this way Massey provides a useful complement to Harvey. But without the idea of structured coherence or the realist notion of a structure of relations, the work that Massey’s conception of space is able to perform is very limited. It is the structured coherence that has causal significance and not the individual elements of which it has been composed; and under capitalism the structured coherence will be a capitalist one, designed to facilitate the accumulation process.

LESSONS FROM SOUTH AFRICA
The emergence of modern South Africa is a useful illustration of how a structured coherence takes shape; how capital has reworked and subordinated to its purpose relations like gender and particularly race, long seen in critical human geography as *sui generis*; how they have, in fact, functioned as production relations, as facilitative of accumulation. The South African case is also interesting because of how, for the longest time, race was given an almost exclusive explanatory importance, and not just in the media.

The crucial event was the discovery of gold in 1886. It was the needs of the gold mining industry for supplies, wage workers and food for them that would be the condition for revolutionizing production relations in South Africa, including state forms, divisions of labor, class relations and ideology. Before gold, what would become South Africa was something of an economic backwater in which pre-capitalist forms of production, particularly on white farms, tended to predominate. Afterwards, they would be forced into a retreat. What had existed up till then, socially, discursively, politically, would be reworked and subordinated to the goal of accumulation.

The outcome, though, was by no means inevitable. The exploitation of the gold reefs faced formidable challenges. Not the least of these was their location in the so-called South African Republic. This was an independent Afrikaner republic where production relations of a decidedly pre-capitalist nature dominated: large white-owned farms where the labor was performed by, largely African, sharecroppers and what were called labor tenants.10 There was an excess that was sold and this market would grow with the arrival of the gold mines, but there was also a strong subsistence element and an impulse to technical development that was little better than anemic. The scene was set for a showdown. On the one hand, the Afrikaner government, dominated by these landowning interests, seemed incapable of responding to the needs of an urbanized, industrialized society: facilitating a labor supply for the mines, ensuring cheap food for its workers, and providing efficient urban administration. On the other hand, it saw gold as an opportunity: a golden goose that, via taxation, a monopoly on gunpowder, monopoly pricing on the state-owned railroads and tariffs on imports of equipment, could be turned to the purpose of industrialization and building up military capacity against what was seen as a hostile British presence elsewhere in Southern Africa.

It was not difficult to persuade the British government, controlling adjacent territory in the form of the Cape Colony and Natal, to intervene. Great Britain had its own problems, not least an uneven development on a global scale that was turning against it; in particular the increasing industrial prowess of Germany and the United States. Its growth industry was increasingly international financial services: lending for the construction of infrastructure in Latin America, the white dominions and in North America and financing global trade. The limit, though, was gold. The gold standard meant that the amount of sterling in circulation was limited by the amount of gold held by the Bank of England. An expansive gold mining industry in South Africa, overcoming the limits thought to be imposed on it by the South African Republic (SAR), would allow this barrier to be breached: the Bank of England would purchase as much additional gold as it could. The result would be the South African, aka Boer, war and the reduction of the SAR into a

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10 Labor tenants worked for the white landowner for a part of the year in exchange for access to some land for cultivation and raising livestock.
British colony, the Transvaal. On this front, at least, the future of gold seemed secure. Even the Afrikaner resentments caused by the war would be later turned to useful purpose.

There was though, a second problem. The reserves of gold were massive but the gold content of the so-called reefs was meager and the reefs lay at a considerable depth. In other words, the costs of mining were daunting. The cheapness of labor would be a crucial condition of profitability. Not only that. There was also a shortage of wage workers suggesting that far from cheap, it would be expensive. It was taken for granted that Africans would provide most of the labor but the vast majority already enjoyed access to means of subsistence, either in the native reserves, on white farms where they were share croppers or labor tenants, or in their own small landowning communities on land typically purchased from white settlers.

The solution would be complex. Central to it would be migratory labor. Africans would be recruited for 11-month contracts, would live in a hostel or mine compound, and then return to where they had originally come from, typically either a white farm or a native reserve. With an exception to be discussed, a permanently settled mining force was discouraged. This would necessitate provision for family housing and their material support. Wages would have to be accordingly higher. But even then the reserve wage of the migrant worker could have challenged profitability, which explains the hiring monopsony put into effect by the Chamber of Mines acting on behalf of the individual mining companies.

In a number of respects the diamond mining industry had been a trail run. Dating from the discovery of diamonds around Kimberley in 1867, migrant labor became a necessary part of its functioning. So too was the ‘native compound’ adjoining the mine. Initially introduced as a way of controlling the smuggling out of diamonds, the gold mines would discover in it a useful means of labor control: minimizing absenteeism, and making labor organization that much harder, as well as keeping the costs of the reproduction of labor power down.

Migratory labor was a solution that the state supported. It too was anxious that gold mining be viable. But it also had its own reasons. Part of the colonial world view in sub-Saharan Africa was that governing the native was problematic. Permanent urbanization risked detribalization and native susceptibility to movements of a politically disruptive character. It was therefore to be discouraged. It was this that led the colonial authorities to put a lid on the conversion of land tenure into fee simple and the preservation of some significant portion of the land surface as subject to tribal tenure. In this way Africans would be able to retain some access to land rather than be forced off it as social differentiation among the peasantry took over. In turn this meant the retention or re-constitution of what was defined as the customary: the tribe, the rule of the tribal chief, and particularly significant for our story here, the patriarchal relations through which members of the tribe obtained access to land. This, in the government’s view, would not only facilitate the migratory form of labor; it would also provide for a mode of governance that would be a bulwark against the dreaded detribalization. In what would become South Africa the native reserves were relatively small. A very large proportion of the African population lived on white farms but had access to land either as share croppers or as labor tenants. Patriarchy ruled in that case too, and while there was no tribal chief the white land owner acted as such and enjoyed powers delegated by the state.

Nevertheless, getting Africans to enter into contracts as migrant workers was initially far from straightforward. In part it worked through the extensive recruiting activities of the mines themselves across not just South Africa but the sub-continent as a whole. In part it was a combination of a burgeoning entrepreneurialism among some African peasants in combination with traditional patriarchal structures that did the trick. A need for money to pay hut taxes had induced some production for the market. An expanding array of consumption possibilities then encouraged more, so that by the beginning of the twentieth century there was a substantial African peasantry. In this context the future labor of unmarried sons in the form of a mining contract to be fulfilled would be pledged against a money
advance or even cattle from a white trading post. Once married and awarded his own homestead by the tribal chief, the same accumulating ambitions would come into play. But until he had sons of his own of age, this time it would be the married male who would enter into the contract as a means of putting money together to invest in the homestead. Meanwhile, his wife, as per the traditional division of labor of African patriarchy (Guy 1987), would cultivate the land and provide for the subsistence of the rest of the family; the male children would be, as always, the herd boys. In short, patriarchy was fundamental to solving the labor problems of the mines.

Accordingly, the so-called migratory system was highly gendered, taking advantage of traditional African patriarchy at the same time as it reworked it through the opportunities it provided for deepening the commodification of African life. It was also, though, and quite obviously, raced. Initially the division of labor in the mines would have been racial without necessarily being racialized, simply as a result of the superior technical and commercial knowledge of whites. This would change with the expanding labor needs of the mining industry. Legislative actions designed to limit African access to land as in the provisions of the 1913 Land Act, and so force them onto the labor market were justified in racialized terms: how wage work would allow the native to learn the, presumably superior, values of the white man.

Interestingly, though, there were also tendencies of a de-racializing sort on the part of the mines. These would meet an immoveable barrier in the form of the white miner. The technical division of labor in the mines required, alongside the mass of workers with little other than their muscular power, a relatively small stratum with some knowledge and experience of mining technique. In the early years this need was satisfied by white immigrant miners from Great Britain, North America and Australia. In order to attract them, the wages were, for the time and the work, quite extraordinarily high. But as supervisors of these white miners Africans acquired a knowledge that would eventually mark them out as candidates for replacing them, which is what the mines then tried to do. This struggle reached a climax in 1922 in what would be called the Rand Revolt. The issue was job reservation; the reservation of the more skilled and as it turned out, better paid jobs underground, for whites. This was justified in unabashedly racial terms: how, for example, Africans should not be allowed to even take the tests required for skilled echelons like blasters since their failure was inevitable; or how the future of civilization in Africa depended on the presence of a well-paid white working class to act as example and standard bearer.

Emphatically this was not just a South African racism. Rather it needs to be seen through the prism of empire and the way in which a white working class drew on imperial hierarchies in order to ward off the threat of low wage competition: what Jonathan Hyslop (1999) has called White Labourism – something equally apparent in the Australia of the time, as in the introduction of the White Australian Policy, and in Great Britain itself. It is, moreover, to be interpreted in terms of not just material interest but an imperial identity; strong Labour Party opposition to the introduction of Chinese labor into the Transvaal gold mines in the early twentieth century is a case in point.

The Rand Revolt was put down along with job reservation but not for long. The upshot of the election of 1924 was a coalition government including the South African Labour Party, strongly supported by white miners’ unions, and a nascent National Party representing Afrikaners. Job reservation would be re-introduced and would persist right down to the early 1990s along with other measures designed to expand job reservation for whites in other parts of the economy.

As far as Africans were concerned, this sealed the commitment of the mining industry to a migratory labor regime. Earlier on the interest in nurturing a more skilled and experienced stratum of African miners had led to some experimentation with permanent urban housing. Migratory labor had been a problem in that regard because on completion of his contract there was no certainty

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11 As in labor union opposition at that time to the employment of Africans and Asians on British ships (Hyslop 1999.)
that the worker would return and in the early days of the industry only a limited interest on the part of the African miner in returning for repeated stints regardless of which mine they were allocated to by the recruiting agencies. Once job reservation was confirmed the mines lost interest in stabilizing their workforce. Henceforth they would be committed to making migratory labor work and come what may, since with respect to African labor that would be the exclusive way in which they tried to hold down their labor costs; which is why they would ultimately fall into line with apartheid prescriptions for stiffening limits on African urbanization.

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One way of understanding what happened in South Africa is, indeed, in terms of an assemblage. Some extremely heterogeneous conditions and practices made a particular outcome possible, pre-empting some possibilities while opening up others; but emphatically, as we will see, only ‘possible.’ A minimal list of these would have to include, and for example:

- The geology of the gold deposits: the low gold content and the depth at which they were found, both of which would put a premium on cheapening labor power.
- The declining fortunes of British capitalism and the concurrent rise there of the country as banker to the world, which, in conjunction with the gold standard, intensified anxieties about securing an increased gold supply. The subsequent uneven development of Great Britain between what Mackinder called metropolitan and industrial Britain would then be part of the collateral damage, but that is another story.
- The fact that in virtue of having colonies contiguous to the SAR the British government was in a position to do something about it.
- The nature of pre-capitalist social formations in Southern Africa: These were intensely patriarchal particularly in areas where tribal land tenure was preserved. A gender division of labor on the land then facilitated a supply of labor in a migratory form. At the same time it subjected wives to the coercion of mothers-in-law. This promoted the practice of running away to the city where there were jobs as maids, and creating the conditions for a permanently urbanized African proletariat.
- The colonial worldview of Europeans at that time: Racism and racialization were taken for granted. This fed into the structure of the colonial state allowing the imposition of measures on Africans that would otherwise have been impossible.
- White Labourism: This sealed the fate of attempts by the mining companies to deracialize the division of labor and to limit the degree of dependence on migratory labor.

These though were only so many limits and opportunities out of which would be constructed a set of social relations – a structured coherence or a structure in the critical realist sense (Cox 2013) – that would facilitate the emergence and consolidation of an accumulation dynamic in what would later become South Africa. It would be a structure that would embrace all moments of the social process while exploiting pre-existing gender relations and ideas about race and the colonial. It took capitalism, though, to ignite the emergent powers supposedly lying latent within the assemblage, suggesting, in turn the weaknesses of flat ontology thinking.

Contradiction would then emerge. Within South Africa itself the growth of a permanently settled African working class threatened to undermine migratory labor and hence the profitability of the gold mines. This would lead to a stiffening of the laws governing permanent settlement: a major feature of the apartheid regime from 1948 on. Meanwhile, the retreat from colonialism in the world as a whole threatened the racism which had led the major powers to look the other way. Racial discourse in South Africa had to give way to a more nuanced ethnic one, paving the way for a South African version of decolonization: the creation of the so-called homelands but which in practice were incorporated as part of the country’s structured coherence around the continuing dominance of migratory labor. The purpose remained the same, therefore, even while the concrete details of the social relations through which it was to be realized shifted. What was
possible, what was problematic did indeed shift suggesting the validity of assemblage thinking. But the overriding imperative of accumulation merely meant a reconstruction of the structured coherence.

CONCLUDING COMMENT
In a context of intellectual debate with critical human geography, the South African case provides numerous lessons. The first is the way in which, for purposes of concrete Marxist study, the idea of a structured coherence, usefully complemented by the idea of assemblage, can play a central role: a structure of relations therefore, which recalls an idea prominent in the more materialist versions of critical human geography envisaged by critical realism (Sayer 1992.)

What I have been describing is a structure of social relations that empowered the mining industry in South Africa. Traditional pre-capitalist and highly gendered structures of social relations were mobilized in an effort to keep wages down in a context where deep level mining would in all likelihood not have been possible otherwise; a crucial relation of production, therefore. On the other hand, it was not achieved without struggle and compromise. It was the resistance of white labor to the attempt of the mine owners to substitute Africans for their higher value labor power that made the mines turn their back on the permanent settlement of a privileged stratum of African miners. This in turn points to the central role of the South African state as a necessary part of this particular structure of coherence. Without it and its limited racial franchise, white labor would not have prevailed subsequent to the Rand Revolt.

The second point is the way in which race and patriarchy were centrally implicated in the accumulation process; how, moreover, they should not be seen as constituting independent structures of relations only contingently related to capital. Rather capital was utterly transformative, changing the meaning of what it meant to be an unmarried African son or an African woman and setting in motion further changes pregnant with implications for the future. Not least the rise of waged employment in cities created new opportunities for young African women and wives, oppressed not just by men but by their mothers-in-law, to escape and to create the conditions for a more permanently urbanized African proletariat.

We can make similar remarks about race. Notions of racial difference are inextricably bound up with empire and early attempts to dispossess indigenous peoples and to draw on their labor power. But having succeeded in thus drawing them into a nexus of commodity relations capital's innate color blindness took over: ‘innate’ because capital, while opportunistic in the way it engages with patriarchy and race, is ultimately only interested in furthering accumulation. It is this which explains its desire to replace white miners with Africans. This, however, ran contrary to the material interests and imperial identities of the white miners who then drew on notions of racial superiority in order to resist de-racialization of the labor process in the mines: a politics of difference, therefore, but one with strong material foundations – not just a desire to protect jobs and incomes but also a sense of self-worth in a context where to be poor or to be without a job was the very contrary.

Finally, we should note how in concrete terms there was nothing pre-given about what happened in South Africa. Even without mentioning the Boer War and its outcome, lots had to happen for South Africa to appear on the world stage as a center of capital accumulation. It took a long while – almost forty years after the discovery of gold – and after much contestation for an institutional fix to be settled on. In short

12 The significance of the migratory form of labor for keeping costs down in a context of gold deposits that posed production challenges is underlined by Crush, Jeeves and Yudelman: “If large numbers of low wage, unskilled workers had not been recruited from throughout the subcontinent, there would never have been a deep level gold mining industry in South Africa. The world’s largest supplier of gold would have been, at best, a minor producer pecking away at the surface outcrops of enormous deep lying reefs. If a ...(similar) ore body had been discovered in Australia, Canada or the United States it would almost certainly have been left in the ground because of the inability to mobilize the right kind of work force” (1991: 1).

13 Even then the gold mines would struggle to preserve it as Africans evaded limits on permanent
concrete trajectories under capitalism cannot be foreseen; which in turn underlines the importance of insisting on Marxism as a totalizing approach to the world rather than, as is commonly thought in critical human geography circles, a deterministic one.

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urbanization and settled down in the cities, creating quite inadvertently the basis for secondary industry that would compete for the labor of Africans. And as populations increased in the native reserves, so the pressures for eliminating migratory labor would mount. This would set the scene for apartheid and a clamping back into place of the institutional structure, racial and patriarchal, which had underpinned the profitability of gold mining.


