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## Book Reviews

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**Helga Leitner, Jamie Peck and Eric S. Sheppard** (eds), *Contesting Neoliberalism: Urban Frontiers*. New York: Guilford Press, 2007. xii + 336 pp. ISBN-10:1-59385-320-3 (paperback: alk. paper).

Above all, *Contesting Neoliberalism: Urban Frontiers* is a collection of snapshots. Each snapshot, albeit taken from a different geographic or ideological position, is focused on the same object: neoliberalism and its discontents. In offering this collection of snapshots, Helga Leitner, Jamie Peck and Eric Sheppard seek to complicate monolithic notions of neoliberalism and highlight the diversity of resistance movements that both contest *and* shape the global neoliberal project. Comprising 15 chapters and based largely on papers presented at an international conference entitled “Contested Urban Futures” held in 2003 at the University of Minnesota, *Contesting Neoliberalism* sets out to explore the relationship between neoliberalism, contestation and cities. Chapters cover everything from struggles over electricity in post-apartheid Johannesburg to the plight of undocumented day laborers in Chicago.

Both within and between the chapters, various tensions are brought to the fore. For example, in their chapter on community organizing in South Africa, Sofie Oldfield and Kristian Stokke examine the tension between a politics of cooperation and engagement (with the state) and a politics of opposition. In his chapter “Contesting the Neoliberal City” William Sites notes a tension between theories of contestation centered around urban movements (Piven and Cloward 2000) and theories of contestation that take structural and macro-economic reform as a prerequisite for the former (Peck and Tickell 2002). In his chapter on undocumented day laborers, Nik Theodore locates a tension between support for community worker centers and conversely the manner in which these same centers inadvertently justify substandard employment. In addition to these various tensions there is another tension that more generally permeates the entire work irrespective of each author’s ideological position or geographic focus. This particular tension exists between reifying neoliberalism and reifying contestation. It is the editors’ fear that “keeping neoliberalism at the center of critical analysis [will] reify its ubiquity and power” (p 5). This said, placing contestation at the center may conversely lead scholars and activists to *see* resistance where it is not, or worse, to conflate merely “scraping by” with contestation. In this paradox a careful balance must be struck if movements are to avoid the political paralysis that accompanies either a vision of neoliberalism that is entirely monolithic or a vision of resistance that is entirely ubiquitous.

In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey locates resistance in the “exploitable contradictions within the neoliberal and neoconservative agenda”. Harvey argues “the more neoliberalism is recognized as a failed utopian rhetoric masking a successful project for the restoration of class-power, the more the basis is laid for a resurgence of mass movements”(Harvey 2005:203). How might the

authors of *Contesting Neoliberalism: Urban Frontiers* respond to such an assertion? Leitner, Peck and Sheppard, in their closing chapter, write:

Those focused on the logics and illogics of neoliberalization often portray its limits in structural terms, as incipient contradictions... But there is a kind of political fatalism involved in waiting, on the basis of theoretical faith, for those contradictions to work out. Those concerned with the diverse practices and subjectivities of neoliberal rule, on the other hand, are more likely to detect productive potential in local agency, resistance and coping strategies (p 317).

There is an obvious tension between these two views of contestation. Both views in many ways respond to the same paradox. On one hand mere praise of local agency, community work and voluntarism too often mirrors the neoliberal rhetorics of entrepreneurship and individualization. On the other, to ignore the necessity of such volunteerism and local mobilization in the face of increased social polarization seems, apart from fatalistic, to go against any principles of social justice. Are these the only choices we have? To serve our communities in the face of state abandonment and therefore justify neoliberal approaches to development, or wait patiently for the “big answer” while our neighbors starve? Margit Mayer in her rather theoretical discussion of neoliberal urban governance, along with Patrick Bond and Peter McInne’s discussion of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, make efforts to transcend this paradox by articulating the ways in which community movements have moved beyond the localities from which they originated to challenge broader neoliberal structures.

Local community organizing has been a necessary response to the various social crises that have accompanied “roll-back” neoliberalism. The ability of these local community organizations to form broader coalitions is crucial. This said, Harvey’s focus on neoliberalism’s contradictions should not be disregarded so easily as fatalistic. The unprecedented rise of neoliberalism itself hints at the ways in which alternative progressive movements, if they are to succeed, must be ready to exploit the contradictory spaces and crises of neoliberalism. In their chapter “Conceptualizing neoliberalism, thinking Thatcherism”, Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell examine the rise of neoliberal theory from its paltry beginnings to its hegemonic status. Drawing from Gramsci’s conception of “historic blocs”, Peck and Tickell point to the role of neoliberalism’s “organic intellectuals” in bringing free-market ideology from out of obscurity. The establishment of the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) and its subsequent merger with the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) provided a strong platform from which neoliberal ideas slowly began to seep into the consciousness of British policymakers. Margaret Thatcher drew directly from the work of the IEA, the CPS and the Adam Smith Institute (ASI). The ability of these think tanks to court the press, policy hacks and key advisors while offering a space in which an ideological base could be built allowed neoliberal ideas to be both appropriated and disseminated through Thatcherism. Neoliberal ideology did not fall out of the sky, nor was it capitalism’s inevitable next step; it began as a strategic contestation. This is the heart of Peck and Tickell’s argument and it meshes well with Harvey’s vision of contestation. If the rise of neoliberalism can be characterized as highly planned, orchestrated and institutionally embedded then to glance at the uprisings in Seattle and Cancun is to look at the exact opposite. For Harvey, Peck and Tickell the rise of neoliberalism as a coherent ideological project

suggests that a chaotic and localized left will have little impact on enacting real and long-lasting change.

Apart from offering a set of snapshots from around the globe, *Contesting Neoliberalism* documents a fundamental tension within the politics of contestation. This tension exists between reifying neoliberalism and reifying resistance; between community service and a politics of oppositions, between community-based struggles (which may reinforce inter-community competition) and struggles that call for macro-structural reform; between coping and exploiting neoliberalism's contradictions. These are not incommensurable tensions for if neoliberalism is an ideology that touches down at multiple scales, so too can a more progressive alternative.

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**Jake Kosek**, *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006. 380 pp. ISBN 0-8223-3847-5 (paperback).

Jake Kosek has delivered a critical, compelling analysis of an enormous topic. *Explaining New Mexico* is no easy task. It's an inscrutable place with a violent, complex history. Doing it critically has, to my mind, not been done, until now.

Previous geographic volumes on New Mexico have focused on cultural hearths and ethnic homelands. And any visit to New Mexico would suggest that this approach is intuitive. But these books, despite the inference of history and tradition that goes with the *hearth* and *homeland* concepts in geography, have often produced synchronic analyses that ignore race and political economy and reinforce cultural analyses of poverty and environmental degradation (eg Carlson 1990; Nostrand 1992).

In *Understories* we find an examination of environmental politics through an extended case study of the politics of difference, particularly the way race and class establish the contours for that politics over land in New Mexico. Kosek dispenses with the *Hispano Homeland*, a concept that has so hamstrung previous analyses of New Mexico, and instead approaches the politics of nature in New Mexico through an attention to the ways difference is created and policed. His is a dialectical approach, so the politics of difference are also shaped by the politics of nature. Kosek seeks to “expand the terrain on which we understand forest politics” (p 274). For this reason, Kosek offers an ethnography of forest politics in which we

spend very little time in the forest. His methodology follows from his central claim: “Environmental politics, questions of access and control of resources, and issues of traditional land-use practices are conditioned not just in the forests themselves but in nuclear laboratories, industrial waste grounds, genetic research centers, and other diverse locales where future natures are being made” (p 275).

In the Introduction, Kosek explains the “racial and class tensions that powerfully haunt so many aspects of everyday life” (p 5) in New Mexico. From the beginning, he rejects previous “cultural pathologies” analyses. He argues that northern New Mexico has never “existed in isolation from the international circuits of extraction” (p 21). He maps a book that seeks to suggest a “more critical interrogation” of the paths the politics of nature and the production of difference travel in debates over the forest in New Mexico.

Chapter 1 is an examination of two acts of resistance to historic land loss, one by New Mexico’s heirs to Spanish and Mexican land grants and the other by Pueblo Indian activists. Juxtaposing these events allows Kosek to connect contradictory historical claims over land and identity. Kosek suggests, relative to Hispanos, that these events illustrate how memories of past injustices and longing tie Hispanos to historic grant lands and ultimately to each other, yet do so in profoundly contradictory ways. This suggests “[t]hese stories of origins and the injustices associated with the land are both collective fictions and undeniable truths” (p 34). This is a difficult chapter in which Kosek tries to make an explosive political point. It reflects Kosek’s theoretical commitment to the past as being produced in the present. But I’m not quite sure he pulled it off in this chapter. I appreciate the theoretical point here but Kosek transforms the violent enclosures to the common lands into a nostalgic tale of memory and grieving that binds Hispanos together in a shared sense of loss.

Chapter 2 examines the trajectories of forest governance in New Mexico. As Kosek describes, the United States Forest Service came to manage most of the former Spanish and Mexican land grants rejected by US courts and operates as a “de facto governing body” (p 66). The chapter traces the foundations of forest management through the ideas of George Perkins Marsh, Gifford Pinchot and Aldo Leopold.

Chapter 3 is a direct critique of the *Homeland* thesis. New Mexico has never been an isolated backwater, but rather an important node in the circuits of capital: “the village of Truchas did not persevere because people doggedly resisted external economic changes; indeed, it owes its continued existence to these same labor practices and their attendant patterns of exploitation and migration” (p 116).

In Chapter 4 Kosek argues that mainstream environmentalism is “haunted by the specters of its own racist creation” (p 180). He traces the development of western environmentalism within the context of white anxieties over racial purity and pollution. Kosek suggests that the same eugenic-driven desires for pure racial categories have infected the preoccupation with pure wilderness among environmentalists. Kosek is careful not to call environmentalists racist, but rather suggests that the silence regarding this racist history produces a profoundly problematic environmental politics, particularly in New Mexico as the chapter so deftly shows.

The title of Chapter 5 is worth the price of the book alone and brilliantly encapsulates the often surprising politics of nature in New Mexico. In the fascinating “Smokey Bear is a White Racist Pig”, Kosek insightfully argues that Smokey Bear

is an exclusionary racialized nationalist history. Smokey is an agent of the state and represents the replacement of local forms of resource control “in favor of the national good” (p 188).

Chapter 6 is the best in the book. This powerful chapter, if not the entire book, should be required reading for every person who calls themselves an environmentalist. It is theoretically sharp and empirically rich. Anyone who has spent any time in New Mexico understands the strange relationships and deep contradictions between the Los Alamos National Laboratories (locally referred to as “the bomb factory”) and the rest of northern New Mexico: a place of great wealth amid extensive poverty; a place where the agents of national security produce significant local insecurity; a place where so many locals find jobs and yet those jobs seem to reinforce the economic marginalization of the region. Through an analysis of the natures produced and reproduced through the realities and anxieties of nuclear bomb making, Kosek demonstrates how the meanings people attach to the forest are produced in the strangest of places. The nuclear–industrial complex in New Mexico produces new forms of nature that have material impacts on forest conflicts and everyday life. In this important chapter Kosek accomplishes his ambitious goal of expanding the terrain of political struggle over the forest in New Mexico.

This smart and well-written book is the best and most important volume on New Mexico ever written by a geographer. It is the first *critical* political ecology of New Mexico. It builds slowly but eventually does achieve the goal Kosek sets for himself: “to write natural histories and engage in forest politics without recourse to essentialist ideas of nature, while at the same time acknowledging the consequential materiality of the forest in political struggles” (p 285). It will be useful in graduate political ecology seminars. It will also be useful in the ongoing political struggles over the control of forest resources in New Mexico.

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Noel Castree and Derek Gregory (eds), *David Harvey: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. 324 pp. ISBN 0-631-23510-8 (paperback), US\$ 33.95

David Harvey is a charismatic representative of the dialectical Marx, and like any committed delegate he makes it his task to, both, speak *of* Marx and speak *for* Marx. His writings, at a minimum from *Social Justice and the City* (1973) to *A Brief*

*History of Neoliberalism* (2005), embody the two entangled senses of representation that Marx so famously laid down in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*—representation as *darstellen* (to describe, exhibit, portray) and *vertreten* (to advocate, intercede, proxy). Harvey, in short, is not an innocent conduit of Marx. He excavates Marx's ideas “from the cavernous depths of his writing”, but, despite protestations to the contrary, also innovates upon them (see Harvey 1999, where he disavows any innovation). In fidelity to his illustrious predecessor, he *produces* knowledge. Take, for example, the dialectical Marx, his theory of capital accumulation stretched in time *and* space. This figure is a product of Harvey's fervent labor (enabled, like any production, by the prior labors of others). There is no dishonor to Marx in saying this because Marx, of course, furnishes the primary raw materials for Harvey's intellectual labors. But let there be no doubt: Harvey's dialectical Marx, the inspiration for his provocative adventures into the imperial dynamics of capital, hinges on a particular rendering of dialectics as ontology and method of study. Like Hegel, Harvey seeks a *principle of necessity that will bind diverse moments into a continuous weave of meaning within the totality of the present*. I want to pursue this claim briefly because it sheds light on the fraught knotting of praise and disaffection that one finds in *David Harvey: A Critical Reader*.

Harvey's clearest statement on dialectics occurs in *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, in a chapter with the no-nonsense title “Dialectics”. Harvey begins by cautioning that “the reduction of dialectics to a set of ‘principles’ might be self-defeating” because: “The dialectic is a process and not a thing and it is, furthermore, a process in which the Cartesian separations between mind and matter, between thought and action, between consciousness and materiality, between theory and practice have no purchase” (1996:48). Perhaps to drive home the point that dialectics is irony in motion, he reverses in mid-course and lays down “11 propositions” that summarize the “principles of dialectics”. Infused with (dialectical?) unease, we read proposition 1: “Dialectical thinking emphasizes the understanding of processes, flows, fluxes, and relations over the analysis of elements, things, structures, organized systems”. So far so good, we think. But Harvey denies us that comfort. Proposition 2 delivers another jolt: “Elements or ‘things’ (as I shall call them) are constituted out of processes, and relations operating within bounded fields which constitute structured systems or wholes”. So, shortly after divorcing dialectical thinking from the “analysis of . . . structures, organized systems” Harvey appears to advocate *precisely* that.

By now, unease has grown into the foreboding that even though Harvey subscribes to Hegel's stance that being *is* becoming and more exactly, always becoming being (proposition 8), somehow—as with Hegel—we already know the shape of things to come. There is hardly a flutter of surprise, therefore, to encounter the following claim (also in proposition 8): “Heterogeneity . . . means more than mere diversity: ‘the parts and processes confront each other as opposites, conditional on the wholes of which they are parts’”. By reducing it to opposition, Harvey has already diluted his initial concession to difference. And we sense what is coming. It arrives toward the end of the chapter, with Harvey explaining how dialectical thinking grasps capitalism: “To explain phenomena in terms of the circulation of capital certainly does not imply that all phenomena that lie within its domain have to be or are the same”. Then, the decisive blow: “Yet there is an underlying unity to the production of such differences and that underlying unity sets limits on the nature of differentiations which can be generated” (Harvey 1996:67).

My intention is not to damn Harvey. To the contrary, I want to point to a running tension in his formidable corpus of work between the desire to foreground process, celerity and emergence and with the same gesture to ordain structure, principles, and forms of difference that are always intelligible. Noel Castree and Derek Gregory's edited collection, *David Harvey: A Critical Reader*, is extraordinarily effective in conveying these two dimensions of Harvey, and in making the less obvious point that Harvey's unsettled desire—a tribute to a body–mind that will not be stilled—is precisely what makes it impossible to ignore him. As various contributors to the book confess (the volume's confessional tone lends it a distinctive poignancy), the intellectual rigor and influence of Harvey's oeuvre is such that it forces those writing on contemporary political economy to reckon with it—or, in the etymological sense of *dialectics*, to traverse through it—for better or worse.

Thus, Nigel Thrift declares in his conclusion: “David Harvey's convictions weigh too heavily on me: his theoretical work . . . is a kind of juggernaut which, to me . . . already contains within it the expectation of acceptance”. *Contra* Harvey he yearns for the “underdefined something”, less redolent with Harvey's “theoretical certainty” and “certainty of critique”. Yet he knows that his alternative approach, which construes capitalism as a “constantly shifting set of translations dependent on a vast number of different but entangled actor-networks for its survival”, *must* contend with Harvey's canonical formulation if it is to have legs. Like Thrift, Cindi Katz is a detractor who acknowledges the ambition and force of Harvey's project; but finds in it an annoying tendency to reduce race, gender and other forms of difference to class. Is Harvey so wedded to order, she prods, that he fears “the mess of difference, the mess of scale and the mess of indeterminacy”?

This is also the brunt of Melissa Wright's critique. Wright does not rush to say that Harvey is a dinosaur when it comes to questions of difference. He may have been until the 1989 *Condition of Postmodernity*, but thereafter Wright senses a shift. She observes that his 1992 *Antipode* article, “Postmodern morality plays”, while a sharp retort to feminist critics like Rosalind Deutsche and Doreen Massey, also represents his first serious engagement with feminism and effort to make “common cause” with *certain* theories of difference. Even so, Harvey's impulse to play arbiter lingers—and in that same essay we find him cautioning: “Some differences are playful, some are poles of world historical domination. Epistemology is about knowing the difference”. Wright's wry conclusion? That Harvey's engagement with difference remains guarded. When necessary he is quick to claim an ecclesiastical knowledge that can pronounce which differences matter and which can be set aside. Nancy Hartsock also rues Harvey's relative inattention to the “feminized dimensions of contemporary capital accumulation”, particularly the gendered nature of new primitive accumulation; and senses that “Harvey may not appreciate the profoundly revolutionary character of feminist, anti-race and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender work”. But all told, she finds him a “kindred spirit” and inspirational thinker who invites rather than forecloses dialogue. Hartsock staunchly defends Harvey against charges of “class fundamentalism” and “economic determinism”, suggesting that the feminist critics who make these allegations risk obscuring the non-incident connection between capital accumulation and gender.

In contrast, Marcus Doel's ludic prose does not obscure his deadly serious intent to shatter the value-theoretic grounds of Harvey's theory. “To get at Harvey's ‘materialism’”, he writes, “it will be necessary to inquire into the ‘economy’ as well as ‘solidity’ of his writings: not only his writing *on* political economy, but

the political economy *of* his writing, which he never fails to capitalize upon (in every sense of the term)". This is a tendentious, even crass, accusation; but it is far from scandalous. Doel could have put it more exactly: Harvey is the owner of a canon/system, whose coherence and certitudes (hence, use and exchange values in the academic marketplace) require the effacement of certain "dangerous supplements" that could otherwise interrupt its tidy inter(nal) relations and desire for completeness (Derek Gregory's editorial introduction is particularly good on these issues). Wittingly or unwittingly, Harvey has become an academic industry: the bearer (*Träger*) of capitalist social relations with considerable market power for his intellectual wares. Doel's claims (about Marx's miscognition of "surplus value", for instance) bewilder. But his essay, like several others in the collection, is unflinchingly provocative.

Indeed, what is unusual about *David Harvey: A Critical Reader* (barring a couple of scruffy chapters with tired criticisms) is the sheer number of perceptive essays. Even so, some stand out. Bruce Braun's gripping argument on the "strange proximity" between Harvey's historical-geographical materialism and the new materialism of Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze is one. Despite profound analytical differences both, he points out, resolutely posit nature as a "becoming" that is *of* society (and vice versa). Although Braun ultimately sides with the "more modest [machinic ecology] explanation" of Guattari and Deleuze because it "may allow for a more effective eco-politics", he affirms the shared terrain with Harvey: that nature is always multiple, always political, and always—like capitalism—an ongoing, practical production. Sharon Zukin's sure-footed account of Harvey's activist writing on cities commands similar attention: "If any analyst can goad us to hope we can change cities", she concludes, "it must be David Harvey". She lauds not only the consistency of his critique, but also—and somewhat unexpectedly, given other interventions in this reader—"his unswerving devotion to 'life space' over the space of capital . . ."

Like Zukin, Alex Callinicos is an outsider to the discipline of Geography. But like her, he commends Harvey's innovative fidelity to Marx in "defiance of changing academic fashions" and his efforts to fashion a Marxism that is, both, theoretically astute and politically relevant. Bob Jessop and Eric Sheppard provide characteristically surgical analyses of Harvey's dialectics. Each concedes the force of Harvey's approach, but finds telling absences: Jessop notes a tendency to treat temporal and spatial fixes as distinct and "little explicit concern" with the "extra-economic" apparatuses that enable capitalist social relations. Sheppard contends that Harvey's migration from *Explanation in Geography* (1969) to *Social Justice and the City* (1973) is less of a philosophical break in terms of his thinking of space and time than is commonly supposed. But he wishes that Harvey, particularly in his recent writings, had paid greater attention to how the global South in its multiplicity enables and infringes upon the imperial West (as self-proclaimed, self-preoccupied geographic and epistemic center of the world). Sheppard struck a nerve: one of my very few misgivings about *David Harvey: A Critical Reader* is the absence of interlocutors not of the West, or at least those able to bring a strong critique of colonialism and eurocentrism to Harvey's Marxism.

Often the editors of a volume will choose to hide behind a cursory introduction or bask in the reflected glory of the contributors. Not so here. The chapters by Derek Gregory and Noel Castree, which bookend the collection, and Trevor Barnes' essay that follows Gregory's, are remarkable in two respects: they are deeply personal yet



conceptually generative. Barnes uses an evocative analytic—of “truth spots”—to weave a compelling account of Harvey’s passage from deduction to dialectics, an epistemic crossing that, he says, coincided with Harvey’s Atlantic crossing from Bristol to Baltimore. Gregory proposes that Harvey’s ability to make geography matter lies in his prodigious writings and relentlessly *systematic/systematizing* project. But it is a troubling enterprise because that it wants to record, recognize and account for variegated otherness while refusing, steadfastly, to be troubled by their non-sublative politics. For all his meticulous attention to uneven development, the vigorous critiques of colonialism and imperialism that have emerged out of subaltern or postcolonial studies may as well as not exist for Harvey. Castree, who in the past has superbly explored intersections between Marxism and postcolonial criticism, appears to have this omission in mind when he says that despite the explanatory-diagnostic and normative power of Harvey’s critical theory, this theory, strangely enough, has come to lack “a subject”. “Harvey’s work over time”, he writes, has been afflicted by “an increasingly inability to identify determinate agents capable of effecting meaningful anti-capitalist struggle”. And the culprit for Castree is Harvey’s lack of “an exacting grasp of non-capitalist forms of power and resistance . . .”

While it is normally prudent to be circumspect about back cover endorsements, this tough and discerning reader—a *festschrift* in the very best sense—deserves the accolades it receives from Jamie Peck and Dick Walker. Find it, read it!

Oh yes, there is the small matter about Harvey’s closing chapter, “Space as keyword”. Ordinarily, I would say something about it. But here I run into my second misgiving (for which the editors are not culpable): Harvey, bafflingly, fails to respond to the singular tributes he is paid by the volume’s contributors.<sup>1</sup> Under the circumstance, reciprocated silence seems . . . well, fitting.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> He has done this before, in the 2004 *Antipode* special issue on *The Limits to Capital*.

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