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## Interview: David Harvey. The Politics of Social Justice

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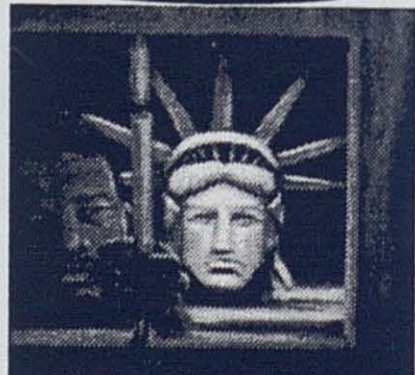
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# CAPITALIZING ON INEQUALITY



Left Untitled, oil on canvas. Chris Huestis.

David Harvey is a professor in the Department of Geography and Environmental Engineering, Johns Hopkins University

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interview: David Harvey

## The Politics of Social Justice

by Raymond P. Baruffalo, Eugene J. McCann, and

Caedmon Staddon • April 1996

during the Eighth Annual Spring Public Lecture Series hosted by the Committee on Social Theory at the University of Kentucky, David Harvey talked on "Justice and the Geographies of Difference." In his lecture, Professor Harvey continued his interrogation of issues of social justice as viewed through the lens of his historical-geographical materialism. Although most widely known to an interdisciplinary audience for his book, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), David Harvey has written extensively over the past quarter-century on Marxism, urbanism, and social justice — a project already underway when his *Social Justice and the City* (1973) radically redefined geographic approaches to the urban scene in the early 1970s.

The major aim of this interview is to illuminate connections and (dis)continuities in David Harvey's body of work at a time when his just-published book, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*,<sup>1</sup> explores the discursive construction of 'the' environment and the manner in which conceptions of nature bear theoretically on broader issues of social justice. The first part of the interview deals with discourses surrounding the definition of the environment as an object of political struggle and academic inquiry and touches on how notions of the individual are mobilized, consciously or unconsciously, in those discourses. In the second part, Professor Harvey discusses the strengths and weaknesses of Marxian notions of productivism and their bearing on environmental politics. The interview concludes with a provocative discussion of institutionalized identities in academia. While Professor Harvey suggests that institutes of Afri-

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can-American Studies, Environmental Studies, Queer Studies, and Women's Studies among others, are politically useful in their ability to provide institutional support for underrepresented viewpoints within the academy, he argues that these institutionalized identities often foster an unwillingness to engage in broad-based political struggles.

**Historical-Geographical Materialism, Discourse, and the Environment**

dC: Can we start with what may be an obvious question? Why this book now; why the environment now? What purchase might it give you?

DH: Well, actually, it is part of a rather continuous project that seems to have me, as a geographer, in perpetual dialogue with Marxism and, as a Marxist, having a perpetual dialogue with geography. The book is not only solely about the environment, it is also about themes of place and space and time and dialectics and materiality and history and geography. In many ways I want to view it as an exercise in how to theoretically construct what I would call an historical-geographical materialism. You can't do that without taking account of environmental history and the environmental aspect of things.

I've always felt that the traditional Marxist emphasis on the point of production missed a lot of things about urbanization, so a lot of my work has been on social and political issues involved in urbanization. I've written a lot on the built environment and it seemed to me that the idea that there is something over there called the 'built environment' and something over here called 'the environment' was a totally false dichotomy. Therefore, this was a very appropriate moment to say: well, you can't really separate those two questions. If you can't separate them then you also have to go out and look at what many people are saying about the environment — how it is being talked about and the sorts of politics that come out of different ways of talking about it. So, for me anyway, this has been part of a long project of the last twenty, thirty years. It's not as if I've suddenly discovered the environment. In a sense, there are bits of it there all along.

dC: Could you say that your focus now, on particular environmental movements and different discourses of the environment, is a new perspective you are trying to take?

DH: Yes, well, I think that it seemed important to engage with what people are saying about the environment and to engage with it criti-

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cally in terms of the kind of perspective I was trying to build (the historical-geographical materialism) and to ask questions about whether these are fruitful ways of talking about the environment or whether they are what I would regard as negative and self-destructive ways of talking about environmental issues. So, I wanted to look more closely at varieties of environmental discourse and, as so often happens, I got led by my graduate students. I had a graduate student who was working with me in Oxford on environmental discourses and I got very interested in what he was doing on the different ways in which acid rain was talked about by scientists, politicians, the public, and environmental groups. You could see these different discourses being set up and used as part of a play of power (Hajer 1995).

dC: There seems also to be an epistemological shift, I think, in addition to a turning of attention to questions of environment for reasons you mentioned. At least in my mind, there seems to be a fairly strong contrast between the rigorous, almost mathematical precision of books like *Limits to Capital* (1982) and the kinds of inquiries you are undertaking now, which are much more concerned with discourses. I don't believe 'discourse' is a term that would have come up in the context of *Limits*.

DH: Well, *Limits* was a very specific exercise of burying myself in the Marxist discourse and then trying to understand from the inside how to approach some of these broader questions of urbanization, space, and time. If I re-wrote it — and actually I'm thinking of rewriting *Limits* — I think the whole question of the relation to nature would be much more strongly present. But I think that the main themes I'm now looking at are still, as it were, defined in *Limits* in terms of human relations to nature, space, time, in relationship to political economy and the kind of politics that can be developed around it. So, my main theme is the same but now I'm doing something different, in the sense of saying that, well okay I have *my* discourse but I recognize that there are all these other discourses; much as I did in *The Condition of Postmodernity*.

In *The Condition of Postmodernity* I had to look at what all kinds of other people are saying and then try to set up an understanding of why people are saying the things they are saying. I think that that also follows through into the discussion of the varieties of environmental discourse because that's a very complex issue and these various discourses have to be addressed if you are going to get anywhere in terms of having a dialogue with them. I don't think that there is *any* environmental discourse that doesn't have some moment of truth to it.

Therefore, the whole question of dialogue is trying to find another way to talk about it that doesn't concede everything that they would want us to concede but, nevertheless, registers what I think are some important points. So, yes, I do engage with discourse — different discursive groups — now in ways that I didn't in *Limits to Capital*. But, if you go back, you'll find that a book like *Social Justice and the City* is, in fact, an internal dialogue between two discursive forms, so in a sense this isn't entirely foreign territory to me.

dC: I wonder about the comparison between the analysis in *The Condition* and your treatment of questions of discourse in that book and the kinds of things I see in "The Environment of Justice" piece (Harvey forthcoming), and the piece on militant particularism (Harvey 1995). Again, to press the point a little, it seems as though there is a bit of an epistemological shift in the sense that in *The Condition* — at the risk of over-simplifying — part of the exercise is to suggest that a lot of contemporary discussions about discourse and power are, in fact, properly thought of as part of capitalist modernity. Contrast that with the discussion of power and discourse in "The Environment of Justice" which seems much more free-floating and much more prepared to accept that different discourses about the environment create a material reality all their own. So, the question of the connection to material processes and processes of production and consumption is still important but, perhaps, secondary.

DH: I don't think I would quite accept that as my meaning. It's maybe what people get out of it, and that's one of the things I never can tell. I think my meaning is to say that — if I go back to Marx's phrase — the world of discourse, if you want to call it that, is where we become conscious of questions and fight them out. I think that's correct. That doesn't mean the world of discourse is secondary to questions of production. I mean some people would use a simple base and superstructure argument and say: "Well, it's all epiphenomena in the discursive realm." But I wouldn't want to put it the other way round either and say that discursive activities construct the world and therefore the discourses are primary in relation to practices. I just don't think that it's reasonable — if you take a dialectical view — to say that one dominates the other. They both *internalize the effects* of the other. Practices, for instance, incorporate technological understandings which would be achieved through science and through the formation of certain kinds of discourses. So production internalizes much of what we have learned through discursive analyses and, at the same time of course, discourses are not immune to being transformed

and translated by material practices.

*Marxism, the Individual, and Environmental Politics*

dC: I would like to point to another tension, not so much between materialism and discourse *per se*, but in terms of praxis on the left. Roger Gottlieb (1995) has argued that radical political movements in the west presuppose, or have presupposed, an individualistic, consumerist ego despite their collective rhetoric.

DH: Well, I think, part of what I'm working on right now, or have been working on and that came up very strongly in the book is precisely this question about how do we understand an individual and in what ways can we create a theory of the individual which is different from that which exists in, say, the Lockian, Newtonian, Cartesian tradition of an isolated entity endowed with certain powers that confronts the world and does certain things to it. This is a very different conception to the premodern view and a very different conception to the deep ecological view, and very different from what I would call a relational view of an individual where the individual is really construed not so much as a box but as a point which is defined by vectors of processes which are more free-flowing.

That relational conception of the individual is embedded in some of deep ecology — you'll find it in Naess<sup>2</sup> for example — but you'll also find it in a lot of the ethnographic materials and you'll find it in the Mediaeval conception of the individual which was very much more porous and open in relation to the world. I think that the rethinking of who is the individual and how an individual exists in the midst of socio-ecological processes strikes me as one of the more important gestures to make, which is why I recently got interested in how we understand the body. So, I think that it is true that most of the radical political movements — and this would also include communist movements — have carried over certain of the baggage of eighteenth century liberal thought on the individual. These movements have also carried over a lot of that thinking into very productivist, instrumental notions in terms of dealing with nature. The left has actually inherited from the capitalist era some very fundamental concepts and hasn't actually *revolutionized* them. I think one of the good things that is coming out of environmentalism and deep ecology is the challenge to reconceptualize these concepts. I think I would accept that challenge.

I mean, I think it is important to admit that the whole history of socialism and communism from the nineteenth century onwards has

not had a good record in its dealings with nature. I think that it's unfortunate if we on the left in that tradition merely go back to the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and Engels and then trot out Raymond Williams and William Morris to say, "Oh well, we were interested in this all along." I think we have to recognize that much of the history of communism has gone in a different direction. And that involves me, as a geographer, with historical interests in questions of environment and nature and urbanization, in some sort of critical stance in relationship to that whole Marxist, leftist history.

dC: So, an engagement with the environment and the individual's relationship to it from a Marxist perspective, would open up the categories of the individual or the identity of individuals and maybe move us away from more crude socialist ideas of the individual as primarily a worker or a capitalist. I realize that's a very crude characterization but does it open it up so someone can be a worker, also a consumer, also ...?

DH: One of the things I have tried to do is to redefine what I think the class relation *is*. The interesting thing about Marx was that he had no theory of class. Where did he write out his theory of class? There are three pages right at the end of Volume 3 of *Capital* where he wrote something about class. If you look in detail at how he treats class, my conclusion is that the proper definition of class is *positionality* in relationship to the circulation and accumulation of capital. Now, that means that the worker as a person has a very complex positionality in relationship to that circulation process. They exist in a relationship to it as consumer; they exist in relationship to it as somebody who has rights of exchange — rights of exchange of their own labor power, rights of exchange of whatever money they hold. They also exist in a certain relationship to capital and the labor process and so on, so that the class relation is really positionality in relation to accumulation. As a worker they may have pension rights and as a pension-holder they have, actually, an interest in sustained accumulation. In fact, you might turn to a worker and say, "I am going to fire you and just think what benefit you are going to get when the stock market goes up after I fire you! Your pension will be worth much more." So this is the point about positionality in relationship to circulation.

Again, environmental questions open up all sorts of interesting questions of positionality. When Gottlieb says there is a whole history of occupational safety and health discussions which are a part of what the history of labor has been about, I think that that's right. The environmental issue in the workplace is just as important as the environ-

mental issue in the living place. Those kind of questions, then, start to change the definition of what an environmental issue *is*. I think the same thing would arise in terms of quality of life in urban areas. If you wander around Baltimore and start talking to people about what they think the key environmental issues are, you get a completely different story than when you wander around in the exurbs or in upstate Vermont. Lead poisoning in Baltimore has a variety of different forms, one of which is bullets and, you know, at that point you say, "Well as far as the people in those situations are concerned, the differentiation between natural and social environments disappears." It's a very interesting thing. Where in this room does the natural environment begin and the social environment stop? Where in a field of wheat does nature begin and sociality stop? We have these extraordinary conventions that there is something called 'nature' and something called 'society.' There are two boxes, can we put those two boxes together?

dC: So it seems then that you see the different discourses taking place at the moment about the environment and how we define the environment as issues that give us a lot of political purchase in contemporary society under capitalism. Do you think that that purchase has increased in recent years?

DH: I think that depends where you are. I mean, I think that in some parts of the world, it has definitely become a major political issue and that some of it is rather conservative, middle class, quality-of-life kinds of questions, some of it is a rather romanticized reaction to the high-tech industrialized world. There are all sorts of strains which you can find. So, I think environmental discourses have a variety of origins and then have a variety of political meanings, and I suppose the interesting thing is how to find common threads or find what are not common threads between those different discourses. Why is it, for example, that the environmental justice movement by-and-large doesn't like the Big Ten environmental groups? Why are they constantly at loggerheads with those people? What's going on there?

There's a funny thing here. What's nature? What if I give you a chemical formula and say, how do you feel about your relationship to that? If you are a chemist you might say that there are all sorts of interesting things that can be done with it. If I then take that chemical formula and represent it to you as a tree, then you relate to it in a different way. Now, what's nature? Is it all the molecules that make up the tree, or is it the tree? The point is that if you see a tree, you'll react to it differently than you would if you saw a bunch of molecules, and if you see a tree in a habitat in a forest with a spotted owl sitting in it you

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would react very differently than if you just saw a tree. So, the question is, what is nature and I think my point is that nature is all of those. I think there is no one, single representation of nature which can really capture the ways in which we might relate to it.

dC: Certain ways of looking at it are given more power in certain cases. The idea of scientific discourse versus some more localist, environmentalist idea of what is best for nature.

DH: Yes, but in our practice, you see, we actually use all of those discourses. When we use paper, we are actually relating to a whole history of technology which is about understanding the tree as a bunch of molecules which can be transformed in different ways into a different form. So, at the same time, we see a tree. It's not as if one bunch of people looks at it one way and another looks at it another way. We internalize a variety of ways of looking at it and as we switch our terrain, we change the sorts of things we think we might want to do with it. If I look at a bunch of molecules, I say, "Well, why don't we transform them and make them do this," and if I look at the tree I say, "Don't cut it down." I think the point is to ask, which way of looking should be dominant?

dC: And that's the politics.

DH: And that gets you into the politics. What are you trying to do? And why would you choose one level of looking at things rather than the other? Why did I choose the tree instead of global warming or why would I choose the molecular structure? To me, the richness of part of the environmental debate is precisely that it captures a relation to nature understood at different scales, understood in terms of different positionalities.

dC: I think this returns us to the question about identity and individuality. It often seems to me that in these so-called debates, say between the pro-spotted owl and the pro-logging forces in the Pacific Northwest, that one of the basic problems is that people are operating within the same paradigm of identity, property, space, and time. So, one of the ironies is that it appears we're speaking very much the same language. One looks from the outside and suggests that you can't resolve these conflicts unless you transcend that language and think about identity in a different way. A sense of identity that would not be zero-sum would say, "Your gain is not necessarily my loss; your sense of property is not necessarily my sense of exclusion."

DH: No, I think that's right. I think part of the problem right now in this whole area is to find a politics that transcends that zero-sum men-

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tality and actually starts to work through a different way of framing what the issue is.

dC: This would be part of what you call "transformative politics"?

DH: Yes. It's transformative, but transformative politics are also transgressive and you find yourself transgressing sometimes the Marxist tradition, sometimes the bourgeois tradition, and obviously some of the deeply-held belief structures of the environmental groups. Take the discourse of the chemist who thinks about molecules and the discourse of the person who talks about habitats and trees. Those are different discourses that can be reasonably combined to look at a particular kind of question. You don't say it's either one or the other, you don't say that you should never think like the chemist. One of the problems I have with some of the environmental justice rhetoric is that it sometimes seems like you should never think like a chemist, you should never produce a toxin. I don't know if you remember the principles of environmental justice,<sup>3</sup> but one of them says you shouldn't produce any toxins. Think how many people in the world will die if we stop producing toxins! This is a very odd principle and, in a sense, it is part of the rhetoric of the environmental justice movement, particularly in its more spiritual forms. It says you cannot ever think like a chemist and if you think like a chemist it's betraying Mother Earth. I would not accept that; you have to be prepared to think like the chemist a lot of the time, but you also have to be prepared to think about trees and habitats and the like.

But again, it comes back to this notion of the transformative ways in which we think biologically and socially and historically. So, I'd want to concentrate on that sort of transformative idea and then ask questions about transformation into what, for whom, with what consequences for whom? At that point you look at the history of what's gone on and you say that, basically, much of transformation has gone on for capital accumulation, for the rich, the privileged, the bourgeoisie, and not for those who have been marginalized. So, indeed at that level, the environmental movement is picking up on something which is very powerful and very strong and very correct. It's saying the environmental transformations that have occurred in our society are for the benefit of some and have not benefited others. And, in fact, environmental degradation has been connected to the whole question of disempowered, underprivileged and frequently racially-marked populations. And, in that sense, the environmental justice movement is dead right in pointing to that as a critical issue. The demand for a different form of transformative politics that is *not* about capital accu-

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mulation and is *not* about reinforcing that power structure is a dead right argument, from my perspective.

dC: Could social ecologists, in terms of building bridges and building a basis for more widespread politics, perhaps be more receptive to broadly defined spiritual views that stress social compassion and transcendence of desire (by desire, I mean desire for consumption)? It seems to me that's another particular tension between the deep ecological view and the social ecological view.

DH: I think that whole argument can also be grounded in a completely different way. For instance, if you go back to Marx's argument that real, sensual interaction with nature is both the grounding of personal and political consciousness and that through real sensual interaction with the world we learn who we are and what we are and how we are and learn all kinds of things about ourselves. I would rather talk about it in terms of sensuality rather than talking about what seems to me to be the somewhat mystical concept of spirituality. This is difficult terrain, I mean I understand what some people are saying when they are talking about spirituality. My difficulty with it is that it often means that you actually come back to a Cartesian split; that consciousness and materiality are separate from each other. Naess, for example grounds a lot of his work in Spinoza but I think actually with a hidden Cartesianism even though they are overtly critical of Descartes. If you trot out Descartes in front of many of those folks, they go up the wall, but actually, if you look, a lot of what they're talking about in terms of spirituality often has this Cartesian element in it.

*Note: The remainder of the interview was carried out the following morning.*

**From Productivism to a  
Marxian Environmental Politics**

dC: It occurred to me that a number of people might argue that your attempt to weld an environmentalist politics to a Marxist analysis is problematic because Marxist analysis, itself is part of the problem, epistemologically. I was trying to think about a critique that would suggest that part of the problem is the way in which we philosophize about nature as an object, about categories of race and about categories of gender as objects. I think that some people would suggest that a Marxist environmentalism might be an appropriate *tactical* position to take in certain militant particularisms, but as a general ecological-

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social project, it is fundamentally problematic.

DH: It seems to me, you have multiple foundational arguments being used in the environmental question and if you're saying, do I think that Marxism can embrace all of them; no, I think the answer is not. There's obviously going to be a struggle over what kind of attitude we take to the environment. My attitude is certainly not that of deep ecology or eco-feminism although I think both are saying something that's interesting. So, for me the problem is to create a very distinctive approach to environmental questions that is embedded in Marxian epistemology.

Now, for some other people in the environmental movement, that might be problematic, but I want to see how far I can get with it. I think that one of the things that's happened within Marxism as it has approached the environmental issue is that it has conceded too much in terms of trying to shape a different epistemological basis. I think Marxists are doing too little to look at the question of how far we can go within the Marxian frame itself to talk about many of these environmental, ecological questions.

My grounding in a lot of this comes out of a very lengthy and deep engagement with Marx's own work. That is always the basis on which I start. Within that framework, I find that there is a great deal in terms of phenomenological approaches to nature, particularly in the early work of Marx. There is a great deal in terms of historical materialism, which I have tried to broaden to historical-geographical materialism, that has a lot to say about environmental issues. I think that environmental politics is not really very well integrated into the Marxian tradition but I don't see any real big barriers to better integration. Not to everybody's satisfaction, but then eco-feminists are not saying things that satisfy deep ecologists or Earth Firsters. So, we know we are not going to satisfy everybody, but there is something that *can* be done.

dC: So you don't think that the inherent productivism of classical Marxist tradition is necessarily a barrier to thinking ecologically?

DH: No. In fact I think it's fundamental because you can't deny the issue of production and I think that Marx's focus on the labor process as being that point of fundamental interaction between us and the metabolic world around us is a fundamental starting point for any analysis. I don't find any theory of production in, for instance, deep ecology; in fact, they evade it. Now, the theory of production is fundamental. So, if you say there is a whole history of productivism

within the Marxist movement, I'd agree with you and say, yes that's problematic. We have to start with the analysis of production, and I think Marx's starting point is the correct one. What kind of production, how production is organized, what sort of relation to nature evolves out of different production processes is a question to be looked at in terms again of socialist objectives which are not about the health of some abstract concept called 'nature,' they are very much about the exploration of human potentialities and possibilities.

dC: So you would define as productivism that way of thinking that sees production as always production *for*; it's always the production of objects for human needs, it's always a productivist approach and an objectifying approach to the natural world?

DH: Yes, but it's a little bit more than that. As productivism developed in some aspects of the Marxist tradition, it basically said that we can use the world around us in any way we want and there are no barriers. So one can criticize that, but for me the philosophical basis for this is to say that production is a process and that it's a transformative process and we're constantly transforming the world around us, we can't stop doing that. Even by the act of breathing and eating we are transformative ecological agents. So, Marx's analysis of production as a process is talking about that process of transforming the world around us in ways that we can use. Now, in the process, we do indeed produce objects and those objects have character and qualities which are, in some instances, fairly stable ecological features. But then I don't see any other theory of ecology that can say we do not create objects for others or ourselves. I mean, what kind of ecological world would it be if we didn't do that? I think a lot of the evasion that goes on inside some areas of the ecological movement about the question of production and transformative activities of human beings is not helpful.

dC: I don't think, though, that that's what feminists are concerned about when they say the production paradigm concentrates on the production of goods within economic circuits and that these always seem to be defined in terms of 'male' activities of production and that 'female' productive activities in the domestic sphere, for example, tend to get ignored, elided, or submerged. I know one of the basic feminist concerns with Marxist thinking is the way in which it has a built-in gender-privileging in terms of production.

DH: Well historically that may be the case but there is nothing philosophically in Marxism that says that it is the case. If action is a trans-

formative process then all forms of transformative activity are part of that production process. I don't think that it is fundamental to the Marxian approach that there should be some activities that don't count and others that do. That separation between what goes on in the household and what goes on in the formal workplace is indeed something that the Marxist tradition has worked with in terms of its definition of class and class relations. It has been important and I don't deny that. But what I'm driving back to is to say yes, there may be some problems with such thought and that production should be looked at as all forms of transformative activities which occur, whether they occur in the domestic sphere or in a more public arena like the workplace. So, there are these historical schisms, if you like, and I think that the feminist critique of Marxist productivism is perfectly correct on all of that. But it doesn't seem to me that that undermines the philosophical basis of looking at production as a process as being the fundamental starting point for understanding any ecological issue.

*The Academy Inside and Out: Institutionalized Identities and Political Action*

dC: Well, it seems that brings us to the question of identity and politics that you've discussed recently (Harvey 1993). Could you talk about how you see the possibilities for a generalized politics which recognizes different identities — the worker, or someone who produces, as being a certain identity or a politics based on being a woman or being gay or being a certain ethnic minority, for instance — but allows a movement to come out of it? Or, have things just become too fragmented?

DH: I think there are some issues where the fragmentations are there and there is no point in saying they can all be submerged, but there are many very pressing issues where, it seems to me, the fragmentations really don't matter so much in relationship to politics. It comes back to the statement by Donna Haraway which says some differences are significant and others are relatively trivial and the key question for a lot of us is to figure out what are significant differences and what are not.<sup>4</sup> For example cleaners and janitors have launched a livable wage campaign against Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. That is indeed a fundamentally class issue but the campaigners are mostly women and African-Americans. They want a livable wage, which doesn't mean there aren't problems of sexual harassment on the



job, that there aren't problems of racial discrimination which are also important in their lives. But if you said that those questions are more significant than the livable wage question, I think they would look at you and say, "You're off your rocker!" Primarily, they're interested in a livable wage and that's the class aspect of their lives, which is fundamental to how they're living and what's happening to them. I don't think they would see this as a separate issue in the way that so many people in the academy would. The livable wage means all kinds of things to them in all kinds of ways and that does include their status as women and it does include their status as African-Americans.

What annoys me a little bit is that when you hit these situations you so frequently find that those people who are heavily invested in identity politics won't enter into them in a supportive way because they are not the kind of issues they like to take on. A lot of academic discussion has moved off into a kind of identity politics which is about struggles for power *inside* the academy and I think some of that is understandable and justifiable because the only way you can get power in the academy is, in effect, to launch some kind of identity-based campaign and to say that this is a special issue that has to be taken care of. But if we are not going to pay attention to the cleaners' and janitors' campaign, then it seems to me that we've got a problem with the way in which identity politics is working inside of universities.

I'm going to speak personally; I often find myself in support of a lot of those identity recognitions inside universities because I think it is very important that those things happen, but then I get very annoyed when that support doesn't come back in terms of supporting projects like the one in Baltimore. That is the dilemma I have with some identity politics in the academy. It's a positive process but it produces a *thing* i.e., a Women's Studies center, a Queer Studies center, or a Black Studies center, and the thing then becomes an internalized ghetto almost and there is a refusal to come out of that thing and engage with broader politics. I think those are the sorts of things that I find a bit hard to take. When almost anything gets institutionalized it becomes very much about the perpetuation of its own existence. I guess one of the things I'm glad of is that I don't have a Center of Marxist Studies. I'm glad I don't have that because I would be worried that I'd lose my center when I engaged with certain issues.

dC: So you have a problem with the institutionalization of identities?

DH: No, I can see that there is a certain logic to it that is probably necessary at a certain stage. In order to build and bolster certain underrepresented groups or currents of thought inside of the acad-

emy, you probably need to go through a stage of setting up a center to highlight it, but at some time or another the point would be to dissolve it. For instance, I don't think that women's studies, in the long run, should be Women's Studies, I think it should be everywhere and understood to be everywhere.

We *do* have lots of centers of class studies in academia — they're all in business schools. If you think of the resources that go into setting up business schools and what they're all about, you say, "If the same resources were setting up labor schools . . ." but hardly any universities have anything of that sort. Again, you can say that one of the weaknesses of Marxist class analysis within academia is that there are very few centers where it has been institutionalized in order to protect itself. There are a few, but very few. It comes back to financial power, and where is the financial power to support these kinds of issues? Financial power lies with corporate capital and the state apparatus. There are very few places where you'd have the financial power to engage in the kind of pro-labor studies which parallel pro-business studies that come out of economics departments and business schools.

dC: If I could paraphrase; it sounds to me that what we are saying is that identity is absolutely necessary and unavoidable, but that it becomes very problematic if one tries to raise it to the level of an ecological-social project. I've noticed that often in your writings, you don't talk about identity, you talk about difference and particularly significant difference and the conditions under which *certain* differences come to make a difference. So, it seems that you are saying, on the one hand, that in certain local particularisms, particular kinds of identity politics are going to be important but that, at the level of projects, we should be thinking about the constitution of differences.

DH: Certain political situations can arise when one element of identity becomes more significant than others. For the cleaning people in Baltimore, the ecological-environmental issue is not significant in the same way it is for somebody who has a comfortable life living out in the suburbs, which is not to say that the environmental issue is not important but that the environment is defined in a different way. For people who live in the inner-city of Baltimore, environment is understood as a set of questions and problems which are radically different from those which you'd experience somewhere else. So, I would have a much more relational view of identity. The self, the individual, the subject internalizes all sorts of effects from the activities they engaged in, and uses that information to engage in certain projects which are more significant than others. I don't think that most people in iden-

tity politics would even make the claim these days that identity is singular.

dC: What they *are* willing to do is engage in strategic essentialism, where a certain identity is considered to be the one that is most important in a given situation. When you talk about the cleaners' campaign in Baltimore and how you don't get the support you'd like from the Women's Studies department, it seems that maybe the reason for that is that they are engaging in a strategic essentialism which gives them political power by focusing on the identity of 'woman' rather than of 'class.' Is it possible to bridge the gap between one strategic essentialism and another? How can one identity help in another identity's struggle?

DH: I think most people would accept that, in terms of strategic essentialisms. There are strategic essentialisms built around the notion of class and some around race and some around gender, and you can multiply that in terms of sexual preference and the like. But, if the strategic essentialism becomes exclusionary and says, "I'm not going to be bothered about that question because that's just about women, or that's just about race and I'm only interested in questions of class." If it becomes exclusionary in that way, then it becomes self-defeating. What has to be engaged in is a process of persuasion to say when a difference is significant and why it's significant.

Why *should* a Women's Studies program or some institute for the study of global power take a position on the situation of the cleaners in Baltimore? The task is up to those who think they should do it to get into some sort of persuasive mode and say, "This is a situation where there is such a strong, overwhelming gender component that not to engage in it is, in fact, to be self-defeating, even though it is fundamentally a class issue." As you make those arguments, my experience is that people are certainly willing to listen. Part of doing politics is power: persuading people that this is a significant issue and it's an issue which, even given your strategic essentialism, should be part and parcel of what you are doing. Through that argument, people can be brought into certain configurations of support. By the same token, I would expect that people from these other areas would approach me and say, "Listen, we need support. What kind of support are you willing to give?" On that basis, even though I'm not working primarily in Queer Studies or something of that kind, it seems to be totally reasonable that I would try to support something along those lines even though it is not my central theoretical interest.

dC: There seems to be a great deal of this coalition-building now, at

least in the labor movement, particularly since the election of John Sweeney.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the academy has fallen behind in various levels of support. Would you think that progressive coalitions in the 'real world' would have an impact on the study of identity in academia and that it might begin to break down these strategic essentialisms in terms of coalition building?

DH: I hope so. I'm not very good at predicting these things, but academia has not been a very innovative place if you look at it as a place where social movements arise. It's been a place where social movements start to get institutionalized inside the educational apparatus. If you look at, for instance, the environmental issue: was it academics who set this whole ball rolling? No, it wasn't really; it was something that was actually outside of the academy, with some dissident scientists inside of the academy. It's been drawn into the academy and taken over inside the academy in all kinds of ways. You've got all these Centers for Environmental Studies now, but I don't think the innovative impulse came from inside. So, I think impulses from outside are incredibly important, and trying to break down the walls is actually a very enlivening experience.

When the organizers of this campaign around the cleaners came to us and said, "We want to come on campus, we want to talk to you," they clearly said they wanted an ongoing relationship with us and they hoped that the people they were talking to would remain in conversation, no matter what happened on this issue. I found that to be a very positive thing and I was very grateful to them that they didn't just say, "Well, you better do something about your university; why don't you go and do it?." They said, "Listen, this is part of an ongoing process," and through that they have pointed out to students that they can spend the summer being trained as labor organizers and there are all these possibilities for undergraduates or graduates to build some sort of relationship with the labor movement. Some people may actually become involved. I think that is all healthy. Now, whether that is going to lead to a long term thing or not, I don't know. Some of us would hope it would and some of us would try to keep the connection alive, but I think some sort of resurgence in the labor movement — building outwards and doing coalitions of this kind — seems to be a very positive thing not only for politics in the city but also for politics inside the university. I am a bit hopeful along those lines. It does seem to me rather crucial for us inside the academy to understand that a lot of the really crucial issues are defined outside. What we are very good at is taking up those issues and institutionalizing them and

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setting them up in a certain way and sometimes co-opting them too. I think Environmental Studies programs have taken up the environmental issue and turned it into something that is about environmental *management*, which is something radically different from what much of the environmental movement, as it was originally defined, had in mind.

### Notes

1. Harvey, David. 1996. *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell. This interview was conducted some months before the publication of the book.
2. For example, see Naess, A. 1989. *Ecology, Community, Lifestyle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. See Grossman, K. 1994. The People of Color Environmental Summit, in Robert Bullard ed. *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*. San Francisco: Sierra Club.
4. "Some differences are playful, some are poles of world historical systems of domination. Epistemology is about knowing the difference" (Haraway, Donna. 1990. A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s. In Linda Nicholson ed. *Feminism/Postmodernism*. London: Routledge.)
5. John Sweeney was recently chosen president of the AFL-CIO in the first contested election since their merger in 1955. Mr. Sweeney oversaw the remarkable growth of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) before being elected to this position.

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