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Denaturalizing Dispossession:

Critical Ethnography in the Age of Resurgent Imperialism

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Introduction

In these commentaries drawn during September 2001, the South African cartoonist Zapiro captures contemporary geographies of empire with stunning precision and prescience. Seen in retrospect, the image of Bush and Sharon swaggering into space serves as a chilling reminder of the anger that erupted at the UN-sponsored World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) in Durban in the week before 9/11. On September 3 the US and Israel walked out of the conference to protest criticisms of Israel – including references in some conference documents to a new form of apartheid. Barely a month earlier, Colin Powell had threatened a US boycott of the WCAR unless the organizers removed references to Zionism as racism, as well as to slavery as a crime against humanity and related demands for reparations. Many saw the withdrawal as a convenient way for the US to circumvent these and other confrontations over racial injustice in its multiple manifestations. I recall vividly several telephone conversations with colleagues in South Africa on Sunday September 9, in which they spoke of the incandescent rage directed at the US and Israel that had consumed the Durban conference.

Juxtapose, if you will, the “geographies of anger” portrayed so vividly by Zapiro with another set of global images – those produced by Thomas P.M. Barnett, a professor of warfare analysis in the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, advisor to Donald Rumsfeld’s Department of Defence, and author of “The Pentagon’s New Map” (*Esquire*, March 2003) and a book by that title published in 2004. The world according to Barnett is divided between the Functioning Core and the Non-Integrating Gap, with a series of “seam states” (including Mexico, Brazil, South Africa, Morocco, Algeria, Greece, Turkey, Pakistan, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia) that “lie along the Gap’s bloody boundaries”:



Source: <http://www.nwc.navy.mil/newrulesets/ThePentagonsNewMap.htm>

Here, in Barnett’s words, is the logic of what Roberts, Secor and Sparke (2003) aptly term his “neoliberal geopolitics”:

Show me where globalization is thick with network connectivity, financial transactions, liberal media flows, and collective security, and I will show you regions featuring stable governments, rising standards of living, and more deaths by suicide than murder. These parts of the world I call the

Functioning Core, or Core. But show me where globalization is thinning or just plain absent, and I will show you regions plagued by politically repressive regimes, widespread poverty and disease, routine mass murder, and – most important – the chronic conflicts that incubate the next generation of terrorists. These parts of the world I call the Non-Integrating Gap or Gap. (Barnett 2003: 2)

Barnett goes on to declare that “In many ways the September 11 attacks did the U.S. national-security establishment a huge favor by pulling us back from the abstract planning of future high-tech wars against ‘near peers’ into the here-and-now threats of the global order. By doing so, the dividing lines between Core and Gap were highlighted, and more important, the nature of the threat environment was thrown into sharp relief” (2003: 10).

In short “*disconnectedness defines danger*” and, we are told in another set of italics, “*A country’s potential to warrant a U.S. military response is inversely related to its globalization connectivity*” (Barnett 2003: 5). The Non-Integrating Gap must, quite literally, be bombarded into embracing Western liberal democracy and market capitalism. So direct, salient, and prescient is Zapiro’s cartoon of September 28 2001 that one is led to wonder whether he had privileged access to these savage Pentagon cartographies.

In a series of recent articles and a brilliant forthcoming book entitled *Hyphen-Nation-States*, Matthew Sparke underscores the crucial importance of grasping how resurgent imperialism works in conjunction with neoliberal globalization, and with related representations of a smooth, decentered globe and a “space of flows.” Indeed, he observes, Thomas Friedman (1999) and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) deploy remarkably similar images of smoothed global space – an imagery that not only downplays American dominance, but is partially enabling of the very asymmetries it obscures (Sparke 2003: 385). There are important resonances, he notes, with representations of space by American leaders in the first half of the 20th century (Sparke, forthcoming). In *American Empire*, Neil Smith shows how these leaders viewed their post-colonial imperium as a “quintessentially liberal victory over geography” and how “this deracination of geography in the globalist vision abetted a broad ideological self-justification for American Empire” (Smith 2003: xvii). A distinctive feature of the current conjuncture is how the Iraq war was legitimized by Pentagon officials as completely congruent with a neoliberal (and thus supposedly non-imperial) project of networking and more fully integrating the globe (Roberts, Secor and Sparke 2003).

Geographers have, of course, long been complicit with imperial projects. Yet conceptions of space (or space-time) and scale as actively produced through everyday practices that are simultaneously material and meaningful can do vitally important critical work in illuminating the exercise of imperial power. Such conceptions are also crucial to the closely related project of a critical rethinking of area studies. In staking this broad claim, I am *not* seeking to demarcate and elevate a disciplinary terrain occupied by a rather small subset of geographers. In fact, some of the most insightful deployments of

critical conceptions of spatiality that are directly relevant to rethinking area studies have come from beyond geography.

For example, anthropologist Fernando Coronil extends Lefebvre's (1991 [1974]) insistence on the importance of a relatively neglected theme in Marx's writings – his explication of the “trinity formula” in Volume III of *Capital* that includes the commodification of land/nature along with labor and capital:

A perspective that recognizes the triadic dialectic among labor, capital, and land leads to a fuller understanding of the economic, cultural and political processes entailed in the mutual constitution of Europe and its colonies, processes that continue to define the relation between postcolonial and imperial states. It helps to specify the operations through which Europe's colonies, first in America and then in Africa and Asia, provided it with cultural and material resources with which it fashioned itself as the standard of humanity – the bearer of a superior religion, reason, and civilization embodied in European selves. (Coronil 2000: 357; see also Coronil 1996)

Coronil is seeking to do for Lefebvre what Stoler (1995) does for Foucault – directing attention from a predominantly European focus to the mutually constitutive processes, practices, and forms of power through which metropolises and (post)colonies make and remake one another.¹

As I have suggested elsewhere (Hart 2004a), in building on Lefebvre's concepts of spatiality Coronil also moves postcolonial debates beyond Chakrabarty's (2000) critique of historicism through which “non-Western” societies are consigned to the waiting-room of a linear narrative of history. In contesting teleological accounts, Chakrabarty posits “two histories of capital” through which diverse ways of human belonging (History 2) constantly modify and interrupt the totalizing thrust of the logic of capital (History 1), but are never subsumed by it: “capital is a provisional compromise, made up of History 1 modified by somebody's History 2” (Chakrabarty 2000: 70). The key limits of this sort of formulation – and of related neo-Weberian notions of “multiple capitalisms” as well as “alternative modernities” (Gaonkar 2001) – lie their abstraction from processes of *interconnection*. Precisely what is so important about critical conceptions of spatiality is their insistent focus on relational understandings of the production of space and scale, and the inseparability of meaning and practice. In so doing, they provide a means for grappling with the divergent but increasingly interconnected trajectories of socio-spatial change that are actively constitutive of processes of “globalization.”

My purpose in this essay is to contribute two related arguments to efforts to rethink area studies in the moment of danger in which we find ourselves. At a broadly methodological level, I want to underscore the importance of critical ethnography and strategies of what I call relational comparison. Such ethnographies are *not* accounts of “local” variations or instances of a “global” process. Nor are they case studies of the

¹ See also Cooper and Stoler (1997) and Cooper (2001).

impact of globalization, imperialism, or any other set of inexorable, pre-given forces. Nor do they simply represent methods for the detailed production of area knowledge. Instead, critical ethnographies offer vantage points for generating new understandings by illuminating power-laden processes of constitution, connection, and dis-connection, along with slippages, openings, and contradictions, and possibilities for alliance within and across different spatial scales. Critical ethnography and relational comparison share close political and analytical affinities with sociologist Michael Burawoy's (2000) project of global ethnography. Yet I want to suggest how an explicit deployment of critical conceptions of spatiality can extend and enrich global ethnography.

More concretely, I draw on my ethnographic research in two sites in South Africa that are closely connected with East Asia to engage with recent discussions of what Marx dubbed "so-called primitive accumulation."² In an important but little recognized book entitled *The Invention of Capitalism* (2000), Michael Perelman calls attention to a deep tension within Marx's critique of Smith and other classical political economists. On the one hand Marx insisted on an historically (and geographically) grounded account in which colonial conquest, plunder, and slavery in Africa, Asia, and the Americas were central to "classic" English primitive accumulation that he took as the focus of his own historical account. Yet his analytical focus in Volume I of *Capital* was on the "silent compulsion" of economic relations, rather than on crude methods of primitive accumulation: "Marx did not want his readers to conclude that the ills of society resulted from unjust actions that were unrelated to the ills of a market society" (Perelman 2000: 30). There is a vitally important distinction, Perelman reminds us, between primitive accumulation construed as an event that can be relegated to a precapitalist past, as opposed to an *ongoing process*. This latter understanding, he argues, compels attention to the gendered relations and conditions of unwaged work – what Mitchell, Marston and Katz (2004) call "life's work" – through which the labor force is produced and renewed on a daily basis.

Engaging with an unpublished version of Perelman's text, Massimo De Angelis (1999; see also De Angelis 2001; 2004) maintains that Marx's theory of primitive accumulation encompasses both an historical element (the *ex novo* separation of producers from the means of production), *and* an element of continuity even in "mature" capitalist economies. The persistence of primitive accumulation, he suggests, is usefully

² In using the term "so-called" to preface primitive accumulation, Marx was deliberately distancing himself from Adam Smith's naturalized account of the accumulation of landed property by capital as "previous" to the division of labor. Perelman (2000: 25) notes that Marx translated Smith's word "previous" as "*ursprünglich*," which Marx's English translators in turn rendered as "primitive" – but which in German is far closer to Smith's neutral language. So-called primitive accumulation plays about the same role in political economy as original sin in theology, Marx remarked – an anecdote of the past that is supposed to explain its origin. What the early political economists portrayed as the "eternal laws of Nature" of the capitalist mode of production – the transformation of the mass of the population into the "free labouring poor" – were in practice established through concrete historical processes of expropriation in which "capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt" (1954: 712). Further, Marx insisted, "The history of this expropriation, in different countries, assumes different aspects and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different periods" (1954: 669–670).

understood through Karl Polanyi's (1944 [2001]) concept of the "double movement".³ For De Angelis, primitive accumulation as ongoing process derives from strategies to take apart those institutions that protect society from the market, and the associated struggles between capital and labor. His intervention contributes to understandings of neoliberal capitalism as a form of "new enclosures" aimed at dismantling the social commons created in the post-war period.⁴

In *The New Imperialism* (2003), David Harvey attributes the rise of the neoliberal project to chronic problems of overaccumulation since the early 1970s. Drawing on Rosa Luxemburg he distinguishes between expanded reproduction and accumulation through dispossession, and argues that the latter has become the dominant form of accumulation: "Accumulation by dispossession re-emerged from the shadowy position it had held prior to 1970 to become a major feature within the capitalist logic... On the one hand the release of low-cost assets [though privatization] provided vast fields for the absorption of surplus capitals. On the other, it provided a means to visit the costs of devaluation of surplus capitals upon the weakest and most vulnerable territories and populations" (2003: 184-5). Finance capital and institutions of credit backed by state powers constitute the "umbilical cord" that ties together expanded reproduction and accumulation by dispossession.

A key shortcoming of orthodox left politics, Harvey maintains, has been its single-minded focus on proletarian struggles at the point of production, and its neglect of the extraordinary array of struggles unleashed by accumulation through dispossession – struggles over displacement, privatization of water, electricity and other services, deprivations of nature, biopiracy, and so forth. The key political challenge is to forge connections between these two forms of struggle – a prospect about which Harvey is sanguine, in light of widespread recognition of the crucial role of financial arrangements in linking expanded reproduction and accumulation through dispossession: "With the core of the problem so clearly recognized, it should be possible to build outwards into a broader politics of creative destruction mobilized against the dominant regime of neoliberal imperialism foisted upon the world by the hegemonic capitalist powers" (2003: 180).

What seems so compelling about the idea of primitive accumulation (or accumulation by dispossession) as ongoing process is its potential to illuminate connections – as De Angelis (2001: 20) puts it, the continuous character of enclosures makes clear how "peoples of the North, East and South are facing possibly phenomenally different but substantially similar strategies of separation from the means of existence." There is, however, a key difference between the "new enclosures" formulation and Harvey's analysis. While Harvey foregrounds tendencies to overaccumulation, De

³ Although this formulation is actually somewhat at odds with Polanyi's arguments, it opens up interesting possibilities that I discuss more fully in Hart (2004b).

⁴ See for example the set of articles in *The Commoner* (no. 2, September 2001) (www.thecommoner.org), as well as the debate between Zarembka and Bonefield in *The Commoner* of March 2002.

Angelis and others in the “new enclosures” school place primary emphasis on working class struggles.⁵

Yet neither formulation can really come to grips with the ongoing fragmentation of the multiple struggles unleashed by neoliberal forms of capitalism, such as those that have erupted in post-apartheid South Africa. While it may be useful, as De Angelis suggests, to understand the continuous character of enclosures in terms of a Polanyian double movement, this is only a first step. Likewise, while there may be dialectical interconnections between the categories that Harvey identifies as expanded reproduction and accumulation by dispossession, these categories and their interconnections operate at quite a high level of abstraction.

Given the potential political significance of this recognition of primitive accumulation as ongoing process, there is a pressing need for more concrete levels of specification – not just in the sense of descriptive empirical detail, but concrete concepts that are adequate to the complexity with which they are seeking to grapple. The material “facts” of dispossession are as important as their meanings – and they must be understood together in terms of multiple historical/geographical determinations, connections, and articulations.⁶

Let me start with the first Zapiro cartoon, and with the expressions of anger over histories, memories, and meanings of racialized dispossession that erupted at the Durban conference. By taking the WCAR as my point of departure, I am *not* making the claim that it constituted some sort of microcosm of the “global” tensions that literally exploded the following week – this was not, in other words, a latter-day version of Clifford Geertz’s Balinese cockfight. Instead, I suggest that we envision the WCAR as a moment when multiple and multiply-scaled forces came into conjuncture (and disjuncture) with one another in ways that speak directly to creative destruction on the ground, as well as to what might be entailed in a critical rethinking of area knowledges.

Post-Apartheid Faultlines

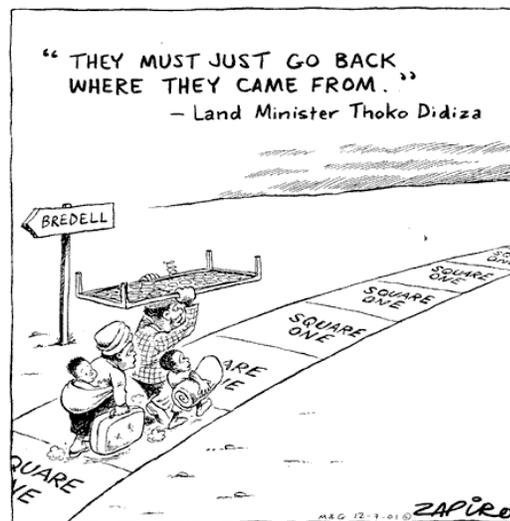
If the UN’s vision of the WCAR as a polite exercise in global liberalism exploded in Durban, so too did the ambitions of the leadership of the African National Congress (ANC) to showcase the accomplishments of the Rainbow Nation. In fact, Durban became the site of strident opposition to the ANC’s version of homegrown neoliberalism, hosting massive marches of the sort not seen since the bad old days of apartheid.

⁵ Various issues of *The Commoner* make clear the relationship of “new enclosures” to autonomist Marxism.

⁶ I am using the term “articulation” here in the sense laid out by Stuart Hall, who extended the concept of articulation along Gramscian lines to include not only the joining together of diverse elements in the constitution of societies structured in dominance, but also the production of meaning through practice: “By the term ‘articulation’, I mean a connection or link which ... requires particular conditions of existence to appear at all, which has to be positively sustained by specific processes, which is not ‘eternal’ but has constantly to be renewed, which can under some circumstances be overthrown, leading to the old linkages being dissolved and new connections – re-articulations – being forged” (Hall 1985: 113-114)

An extremely significant land occupation helped to catalyze the oppositional movements that burst on to the international stage at the WCAR, severely embarrassing the ANC government. In early July 2001 the Pan African Congress “sold” tiny plots carved from Bredell farm, a barren patch of land between Johannesburg and Pretoria, for R25 (approximately \$3) to thousands of hopeful settlers who immediately started erecting ramshackle shelters. The occupation provoked a national uproar in which spectres of Zimbabwe were widely invoked, and the ANC government moved swiftly to evict the settlers. Television broadcasts carried images, eerily reminiscent of the apartheid era, showing heavily armed police – supported by the hated and feared East Rand Dog Unit – pushing people into armored vehicles, while many who had evaded arrest declared their defiance of the state. Other vivid images include Housing Minister Sankie Mthembu-Mahanyele beating a hasty retreat in her Mercedes Benz as angry settlers shouted “*hamba! hamba!*” (go away); Land Affairs Minister Thoko Didiza declaring on television that “when foreign investors see a decisive government acting in the way we are acting, it sends the message that the government won’t tolerate such acts from whomever”; and Didiza proclaiming that “these people must go back to where they came from” as “red ants” (workers in red overalls employed by a company to which the removals were outsourced) ripped apart the rudimentary shelters.

True to form, in the *Mail and Guardian* of July 7 2001, the inimitable Zapiro offered scathing commentary on this hegemonic crisis of the post-apartheid state:



7/13/2001

Although protests over the evictions were quickly contained, the moral fall-out reverberated powerfully through South African society. Bredell represented a dramatic conjunctural moment, exposing the cracks and fissures that have accompanied what John Saul (2000) calls the ANC’s efforts to build its hegemonic project on the altar of the marketplace. Most immediately Bredell shone the spotlight of attention on the fierce

extremes of wealth and poverty that appear to have intensified in the 1990s, despite a degree of deracialization in the upper reaches of the income distribution.⁷ By chance – but very significantly – the day before the Bredell occupation began, a coalition comprising Cosatu (the Congress of South African Trade Unions), the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), and a number of churches issued a press release calling for a universal Basic Income Grant (BIG) of R100 a month.⁸ In November 2001, TAC issued the “Bredell Consensus Statement on the Imperative to expand access to Anti-Retroviral Medicines for Adults and Children with HIV/AIDS in South Africa.”

While Bredell was about far more than access to land, it exposed “the land question” as a particularly vulnerable flank in the ANC’s armory of state. Less than two weeks after the Bredell evictions, on July 23-24 2001, the Landless People’s Movement (LPM) was launched in Johannesburg to protest the snail’s pace of land reform, and its framing in terms of a “willing buyer, willing seller” model.⁹ The LPM was established under the auspices of the National Land Committee (NLC) – an umbrella organisation of NGOs, with affiliates in each of the provinces, set up since late 1970s to oppose forced removals. After 1994 a number of land activists moved from NGOs into government, at the same time that NGOs affiliated with the NLC were conscripted into playing an increasingly state-like role in the countryside, implementing government policies (James 2002). Their growing frustration with what were widely seen as deeply flawed policies of land reform was one of the factors feeding into the formation of the LPM.¹⁰ Another

⁷ For a summary of evidence on increasing poverty and inequality, see Natrass and Seekings (2002). In November 2002, Statistics SA released figures suggesting a decline in income of the poorest 50% of the population between 1995 and 2000 (Smith 2002: 1). Other Stats SA research suggests that the havoc wrought by unemployment and its associated drop in incomes was somewhat assuaged by R53-billion pumped into poor communities in the form of housing, electricity and water. In other words, asset poverty declined while income poverty increased. Yet, as critics point out, principles of cost recovery discussed below undermine these claims (see references in footnote 12).

⁸ The BIG coalition grounded its demand in the report of the Commission of Inquiry into a Comprehensive Social Security System chaired by Vivian Taylor, which estimated that nearly 14 million people in the 40% of poorest households (approximately 20 million people) do not qualify for any social security transfers. The Coalition estimated that the BIG would close the poverty gap by more than 80%, and that the net cost would be R20-25 billion annually, with the majority of the cost recovered through progressive taxation.

⁹ For more on the Landless People’s Movement, see Greenberg (2002; 2004) and Mngxitama (2002).

¹⁰ At the time of Bredell, land redistribution had effectively come to a halt. Soon after assuming office in 1999, Didiza placed a moratorium on the main land redistribution initiative of the previous administration – the Settlement and Land Acquisition Grant (SLAG), through which households earning less than R1500 a month were eligible for a grant of R15000 (later increased to R16000) that they could use to purchase land on a willing buyer-willing seller basis. In 2000, the Department of Land Affairs proposed a new programme entitled Land Reform for Agricultural Development (LRAD) – the clear intent of which is to promote the development of a class of full-time black commercial farmers. LRAD only came online at the end of 2001, fully two years after the SLAG had been put on hold, and in the context of a rising clamour for land. Essentially, LRAD ties land redistribution to the agenda of the national Department of Agriculture at a time when South African agriculture has one of the lowest levels of state protection in the world (Walker 2001).

was the anger of black tenants over ongoing abuses on white-owned farms despite the Extension of Security of Tenure Act which, some critics alleged, simply instructed white farmers on how to go about evicting tenants. Events in Zimbabwe also helped to propel the formation of the LPM, as did connections with the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (MST) and Via Campesina.¹¹

Bredell also turned the spotlight of attention on urban-based movements opposing the rising costs of basic services – mainly water and electricity – along with widespread cutoffs of these services for those who fail to pay, as well as evictions from township housing for rent arrears. At stake in these struggles are neoliberal principles of cost recovery through which township residents frequently pay higher rates for services than those living in well-resourced former “white” areas.¹² Based primarily in the main metropolitan centres, these movements – loosely grouped into the Anti-Privatisation Forum – include the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC), the Concerned Citizens Forum in certain townships in Durban metropolitan region, and the Anti-Eviction Campaign in Cape Town.¹³ Directed most immediately against the institutions of local government these urban movements are, as Leonard Gentle (2002:18) has observed “defensive struggles against the immediate oppressor – the local government functionary cutting off their water, evicting workers from their houses or suspending electricity connections.”

The WCAR protests were a rehearsal for an even larger collective expression of anti-neoliberal sentiment. Almost exactly a year later, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg became another staging ground for highly visible protests, culminating in a spectacular and symbol-laden march by a large group of oppositional movements and their supporters under the banner of the “Social Movement Indaba” from the slums of Alexandra township to the obscenely commodified citadel of Sandton.

Much of the left commentary following the WSSD march was strongly celebratory.¹⁴ Yet in retrospect it has become clear that the movements are deeply

¹¹ For more on these movements and the relationships among them, see the Land Action Research Network (<http://www.landaction.org>).

¹² See McDonald and Pape (2002), Ngwane (2003), and Bond (2004).

¹³ Dissatisfaction around these issues had been simmering since at least 1997, erupting in sporadic protests in different regions. According to Pape and McDonald (2002:7), ‘The Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) began in Johannesburg as a response to the iGoli plan. Originally it included Cosatu, several of its affiliates, a number of community-based structures and a range of left-wing political organisations. In Johannesburg, Cosatu eventually pulled out of the APF because of conflict with other organisations. In 2000 and 2001, APFs were formed in other municipalities. In late 2001 a national meeting of the APFs was held to develop a national programme of action. While Cosatu is not active in most of the APFs, SAMWU, a leading Cosatu affiliate, has taken a resolution to form APFs and has participated extensively in their development in most areas.’

¹⁴ Indymedia South Africa, for example, proclaimed that “August 31 2002 will go down in history as the beginning of a new movement in South Africa and the world – a movement that asserts the power of

fractured – and quite far from constituting a counter-hegemonic pole, as some had claimed at the time of the marches. There is, as Greenberg (2002) has pointed out, a paradox of growing grassroots opposition and militant action, along with a sharpening of divisions within and among movements, and growing tensions in relations with NGOs.¹⁵

Some of these tensions were, in fact, quite evident at the time of the WSSD, when the LPM bussed in some 5000 people from all corners of the country to participate in a “Week of the Landless” at Shareworld, a derelict theme park on the outskirts of Soweto. What Shareworld made clear was the extraordinary array of interests and agendas yoked together under the LPM’s banner of ‘Land, Food, Jobs!’ Participants defining themselves as “the landless” included not only farm laborers and tenants, but also chiefs, school teachers and other professionals, disgruntled restitution claimants, and a number of residents of informal settlements in the Gauteng area – some of whom came into fairly explosive conflict with one another, and with NGO representatives, over the course of the week. Tensions between the LPM and the APF also sprang into public view during the Social Movements Indaba march, when sharp debate erupted over the LPM’s support for Mugabe.¹⁶ Since then, other divisions have emerged within and between NGOs and oppositional movements.¹⁷ Within and between movements, there is also intense and ongoing debate between those who advocate direct action, rejecting what they see as a

people over delegated leaders and representatives in government, NGOs, political parties and the bureaucratised trade union movement; the power of people over profits and the interests of the rich; the power of collective, democratic action in the creation of another world outside of capitalism.” (Indymedia South Africa, August 31, 2002)

¹⁵ See, for example, how Ashwin Desai’s celebratory account of oppositional movements in *The Poors of South Africa* (2002) has given way to the far more circumspect observation in a recent article that these movements confront the danger of “remaining localized, particularistic, and single-issue focused” (2003).

¹⁶ In a sympathetic but critical overview of the state of the LPM in the second half of 2002, Stephen Greenberg noted in the context of the LPM’s support for Mugabe that “The failure of the LPM to distinguish between a mass-based land occupation movement and the desperate measures of a repressive nationalist government in crisis has created an obstacle to more thoroughgoing unity between the landless and the urban grassroots movements. In appearance, even if not in reality, the landless movement is perceived as unconcerned about democratic and worker rights. Uncritical support for Zanu-PF and the Zimbabwean state suggests ideological contradiction and haziness in the landless movement” (Greenberg 2002: 8).

¹⁷ Conflicts among different NGO activists in the NLC and its affiliates over the form and direction of the LPM intensified in the period following the WSSD, and in July 2003 some affiliates succeeded in ousting the director of the NLC. Deborah James has pointed to the tension-ridden conditions in which land NGOs find themselves: ‘On the one hand, the land NGOs see their role as one of challenging the state, moving it beyond what has come to be seen as its narrow, even Thatcherite, focus on the entrenching and restoring of property rights. On the other, however, much as these activists may want to commit themselves primarily to championing the informal rights of the poor, they are compelled by the insistent demands of their many constitutents, and by financial considerations, to play a supportive role to the Department of Land Affairs in its implementing of the land reform programme’ (James 2002: 15).

dangerous and outdated vanguardism, and those who maintain the necessity of engagement with different levels of the state.¹⁸

The chasm between these “new” social movements and the “old” left of the ANC Alliance – Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) and the South African Communist Party – is even wider. In his commentary on the absence of any participation of traditional formations of the working class in rural and urban movements, Leonard Gentle (2002: 19) points to the trade union movement’s failure to come to grips with the recomposition of the working class towards higher unemployment, increased informalization, changing male-female ratios, and the emergence of what he calls a new urban-rural commuter status. He goes on to suggest that struggles around landlessness, evictions, and electricity and water cutoffs offer opportunities for the labor movement “to experiment with new forms of organisation that are more conducive to organising the unemployed and retrenched workers or casual workers and workers in the informal sector. Their ‘site of struggle’ is not so much the regular workplace, but somewhere between the workplace and the township” (ibid.). Yet to date this promise remains radically unfulfilled.

The embattled position in which Cosatu finds itself derives not only from the sharp contraction of relatively secure industrial jobs associated with capitalist restructuring, but also the shift of leadership into government after 1994, and the compromises imposed by Cosatu’s incorporation within the ANC Alliance.¹⁹ These dilemmas sharpened dramatically in the period following the WSSD when senior ANC government officials launched concerted attacks on the “ultra-left”, excoriating the “anti-neoliberal coalition” and accusing it of acting in alliance with “real neoliberals” (i.e. the predominantly white Democratic Party) and foreign elements hostile to the national democratic revolution.²⁰ In the context of the 2004 elections the ANC has assumed the mantle of a conservative social democracy that incorporates some remarkably retro developmentalist rhetoric of a “first” and “second” economy.²¹ At the same time the election also made clear that, while support for the ANC has diminished, it continues to command considerable hegemonic power.

In short, the rise of oppositional movements demanding redistribution and decommmodification of land, water, electricity, anti-retroviral drugs, and so forth exemplify precisely what Harvey (2003) defines as the struggles unleashed by accumulation through dispossession. Yet the tensions that have accompanied their emergence in relation to one another and to organized labor make clear that their coherence in practice is far from assured.

¹⁸ See, for example, Ngwane (2003; *2004?*).

¹⁹ See Buhlungu (2002) for a useful analysis of the position of organized labor.

²⁰ In September 2002, the Political Education Unit of the ANC issued a document entitled ‘Contribution to the NEC/NWC Response to the “Cronin Interviews” on the Issue of Neoliberalism’. See also Dumisani Makhaye (2002) ‘Left Factionalism and the NDR: The ANC must respond to professionals of the “left”’ (<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/anctodya/docs/at-sup021129.htm>); and Jabu Moleketi and Josiah Jele (2002) with the response by David Masondo (2002).

²¹ I discuss these shifts at greater length in Hart (2004b).

Accumulation through dispossession may be a useful first step in highlighting the deprivations wrought by neoliberal forms of capital, but it needs to be infused with concrete understandings of specific histories, memories, meanings of dispossession. To be grasped as an ongoing process, dispossession also needs to be rendered historically and geographically specific, as well as interconnected – and these specificities and connections can do political as well as analytical work. Drawing on my research on Taiwanese industrialists in South Africa, and on sharply divergent political dynamics in two structurally similar sites in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, I shall now try to suggest in broad outline how critical ethnography and relational comparison can help to illuminate such understandings in a way that might contribute to forging connections across diverse but interrelated arenas of struggle.

Denaturalizing Dispossession

While dispossession is clearly about far more than land, any effort to grapple with questions of dispossession as an ongoing process in South Africa has to start with what is widely known as “the land question.” In the liberation movement and South African society more generally, invocations of the “land question” – a term that conjures up how the forces of colonialism and apartheid robbed black South Africans of 87 percent of their land and packed them into reserves or bantustans in the remaining 13 percent – continue to carry tremendous symbolic and moral force (Walker 2000). Yet in practice, “the land question” has increasingly become defined in terms of the “willing buyer, willing seller” and radically underfunded land reform program that helped to propel the formation of the Landless People’s Movement. Narrowly focused on agriculture and “the rural,” the main thrust of land redistribution policies is the formation of a black commercial farming class at a moment when South African agriculture has one of the lowest levels of state protection in the world.

Historically, the mainly urban-based liberation movement has paid comparatively little attention to agrarian issues or to linking rural with urban struggles.²² There are, indeed, important exceptions to this general tendency.²³ By and large, however, many activists and intellectuals have taken for granted the vanguard role of the urban industrial working class in paving the way towards socialism. Thus, for example, at the height of

²² In an illuminating account of a workshop organized by ANC activists in Lusaka, Zambia in February 1990 to discuss future of land and agrarian policy, Heinz Klug – a member of the ANC’s Land Commission established at that workshop – subsequently observed that “. . . all the participants . . . seemed to assume that nationalization of existing land holdings, given a history of dispossession and the vast inequalities in land holdings between black and white, would be high on the agenda of an ANC government. This shared assumption was based in no small part on our commitment to the 1955 Freedom Charter . . . Despite our assumptions and the liberation movement’s general rhetoric on the ‘Land Question,’ activists at the workshop had a realistic view of the low priority rural issues had on the mainly urban-based ANC’s political agenda in the late 1980s” (Klug 2000: 124–125).

²³ See Drew (1996) for a useful account of political debates over “the agrarian question” in South Africa.

apartheid-era dispossession from the land in the 1970s, many on the left insisted that forced removals and farm evictions should be understood in terms of “economics” rather than “politics.” The fear was that attributing the brutality of racialized dispossession to apartheid instead of to capitalism would detract from an understanding of capitalist dynamics, and undermine the possibilities for a socialist future driven by the urban working class.

The result, however, has been a tendency to regard dispossession from the land as a “natural” precursor of industrial development, urbanization, and capital accumulation. In this widely-held view, South Africa is a modernizing, predominantly urban industrial economy at an earlier stage of development in a linear progression that was followed by Western Europe and North America. These tendencies were reinforced in the early post-apartheid period when influential intellectuals in the labor movement made extravagant claims about how South Africa was to follow a “high road” of industrial development along the lines of the so-called “Third Italy.”

In calling the natural status of dispossession into question and suggesting its contemporary salience as an ongoing process, I draw on a seemingly unlikely source: the movement of small-scale Taiwanese capitalists into peripheral regions of South Africa, many of which were the major sites of apartheid-era dispossession and displacement (Hart 2002). Starting in the early 1980s, the apartheid state offered huge subsidies to industrialists to move to areas within or closely adjacent to huge relocation townships in patches of land defined as part of the bantustans, many of them within 15-20km of former white towns like Ladysmith and Newcastle where I conducted research between 1994 and 2001. At precisely that moment, large numbers of industrialists came under enormous pressure to leave Taiwan, driven out by rising wages, rents, and escalating exchange rates – conditions created by the stunning pace of their own industrialization and export drive. During the 1980s well over 300 Taiwanese factory owners moved to these densely-settled racialized spaces in the South African countryside, bringing with them not only equipment and labor-intensive production techniques that were rapidly becoming obsolete in Taiwan, but also a set of labor practices that proved socially explosive. Yet the processes from which they have emerged are highly illuminating, because they force us to rethink taken-for-granted categories.

These Taiwanese industrialists are the product of redistributive land reforms in the late 1940s and early 1950s that broke the power of the landlord class, transformed agrarian relations, and helped create the conditions for the emergence of a large class of peasant-industrialists. Land reforms in Taiwan, as well as in Japan and South Korea, were backed and funded by the US, and aimed at circumventing peasant insurgency through which Mao Zedong had swept to power in Mainland China.²⁴

²⁴ Fresh from their defeat by Mao’s peasant army, the Guomintang nationalists who fled to Taiwan in the late 1940s were determined to pre-empt any sort of rural opposition or uprising. Following the onset of the Korean War in 1950, the Guomintang received substantial support from the US; American advisors (who had just pushed through a land reform in Japan) supplied experts, advice, and funds to back land reforms, channeled through the Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction (JCRR).

As I argue in much greater detail in my book (Hart 2002), an unintended consequence of East Asian land reforms is that they operated in effect as a social wage underwriting the massive mobilization of industrial labour in Taiwan. Similarly much of the spectacular growth of industrial production in Mainland China since the early 1980s has taken place in villages and small towns, and was preceded by relatively egalitarian redistribution of land rights among (although not within) households. While the specific forms of industrial accumulation – including, very importantly, their inflection through idioms and relations of gender and kinship – have been varied in different regions, the close connections between agrarian redistribution and industrial expansion are pervasive. In other words, some of the most rapid industrialization in the last part of the 20th century has taken place *without* dispossession from the land – indeed, quite the opposite.²⁵ Driven in part by Mao’s mobilization of the Chinese peasantry, these distinctively “non-Western” trajectories have played a central role in shaping the conditions of global competition and tendencies towards over-accumulation.

Seen in relationship to South Africa, these East Asian trajectories offer a powerful means for rendering dispossession peculiar, and for clarifying how it operates as an ongoing process that continues to shape the material conditions of reproduction of labor power. Most immediately, East Asian connections turn the South African reserve subsidy thesis on its head. In his pathbreaking 1972 article, Harold Wolpe recognised that the capacity of the reserves to provide broadly-based subsistence had run out of steam. What he could not have foreseen at the time was how agrarian subsidies in other parts of the world would underwrite the massive mobilization of labor, and a breakneck pace of industrialisation of the countryside.

At precisely the point that redistributive reforms were going on in East Asia, millions of black South Africans were being ripped from the land in “white” South Africa through forced removals from African freehold land and evictions from white-owned farms, and thrust into relocation townships where livelihoods were radically commodified. Ironically, it was in precisely these areas that many Taiwanese set up their factories. In an article published some years ago (Hart 1995), I showed how the purchasing power of wages paid by Taiwanese industrialists in South Africa was *lower* than those in comparable Taiwanese industries in Mainland China, even though money wages earned by South African workers were considerably higher than those in China. In contrast to their Chinese counterparts, who had access to land and the remnants of socialist-era redistribution, South African workers had been moved into relocation townships where they had to pay for everything.

Yet there was a cushion of sorts. During the apartheid era, residents of relocation townships in the former bantustans paid relatively low, flat service charges for water, electricity, and rent. Essentially, these heavily subsidized service charges were part of a Faustian bargain through which the apartheid state sought to manufacture some degree of

²⁵ Particularly in the earlier stages of industrialization in Taiwan and China, state extraction of resources from agriculture was significant. Yet, as I discuss more fully in my book, there is strong evidence to suggest that, at the level of the household, taxation of agriculture was more than offset by increasing non-agricultural incomes.

consent on the part of the large numbers of black South Africans who were moved into relocation townships. In the post-apartheid era, principles of cost recovery have meant escalating service charges – along with the growing anger of township residents all over the country. The widespread refusal to pay rising charges for water, electricity, and rents constitutes one of the key elements in the fiscal crisis confronting most local governments – as well as a driving force behind the emergence of oppositional movements in different urban areas. In other words, from an East Asian perspective what is distinctive and peculiar about South Africa is both the depth and extent of racialized dispossession, and the way it is being perpetuated – if not intensified – by principles and practices of cost recovery.

The insights from these relational comparisons can, of course, be deployed to argue that land reforms and other forms of redistribution are needed to provide wage subsidies to lower labor costs – as well as to contain dissent. Yet they can also be taken in a very different direction. As I discuss more fully in my book, East Asian-South African connections suggest how the powerful moral force of the ‘land question’ – a force that derives from histories, memories, and meanings of racialized dispossession, together with the imperative of redress – might be harnessed and redefined to support the formation of broadly-based popular political alliances to press for social and economic justice.

Growing out of these connections, a central suggestion of the book is the need to dis-articulate or delink the land question from agriculture and from individual restitution claims, and to re-articulate it in terms of racialized dispossession as an ongoing process – along with the erosion of social security, and the moral and material imperative for a social wage and secure livelihood. In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, this move extends the definition of the social wage beyond employment-based entitlements or even conventional social policy to insist on basic social security grounded in citizenship rights. By strengthening and extending claims for redistributive justice, this redefinition holds out the possibility for linking struggles in multiple arenas, as well as across the rural-urban divide.

Reframing dispossession and redress in terms of a social wage and secure livelihood is also a way of re-articulating race and class.²⁶ Thus, for example, it could be used to support a mounting critique within the ANC alliance of the elitism of official strategies of “black economic empowerment.”²⁷ It could also be invoked to contest official claims about a “culture of entitlement” in the intensifying national debate over a

²⁶ These arguments build on Stuart Hall’s conception of articulation, which in fact grew out of his engagement with the race-class debate in South Africa in the 1970s (Hall 1980; 2002). Although gender and sexuality are major lacunae in Hall’s analysis, his concept of articulation can usefully incorporate these and other dimensions of difference.

²⁷ See, for example, Rapule Tabane “Ending elitism,” *Mail and Guardian Online* August 13, 2004. Available at <http://www.mg.co.za/Content/13.asp?ao=120316>.

basic income grant (BIG).²⁸ More generally this sort of reframing could, in principle, be deployed in a variety of struggles, both national and transnational.

In practice, strategies that build on dispossession as an ongoing process must engage with specific local configurations of social forces and material conditions, but also extend out from there to connect with forces at play in regional, national, and transnational arenas. Part of the reason, as I argue more fully in my book, is that so-called “developmental local government” has become a key locus of contradictions of the post-apartheid order, helping to expose the vulnerable underbelly of neoliberal capitalism.

In addition my work in Ladysmith-Ezakheni and Newcastle-Madadeni shows very clearly how political dynamics assume sharply divergent forms, even in two closely adjacent places that are in many respects quite similar. In other words, people’s understandings of themselves as political subjects and actors have taken shape in different ways in the two places through overlapping struggles in multiple arenas. What emerges from the historical ethnographies is how forced removals were far more deeply contested in areas around Ladysmith than in comparable areas of Newcastle; how these differentiated patterns of resistance to dispossession carried over into township politics and different forms of connection to the liberation movement and organized labor; and how township and workplaces struggles were deeply interconnected, but assumed sharply different forms.

The book also delves into differing relations between different groups of capitalists and the local state, their diverse connections with regional, national, and transnational arenas of state power and capital accumulation, and how interconnected local struggles in turn reshaped these connections and relationships. Through all of this what also emerges is how race and gender played out quite differently in the context of struggles over wages, working and living conditions, and how Zulu ethnic nationalism assumed startlingly different forms in the two places. In the post-apartheid era these dynamics played into the formation of the local state in the two places. Yet they have not in any unilateral sense “determined” subsequent developments – which have, in fact, been marked by ongoing twists and turns that both reflect and to some degree reconfigure forces at play in regional, national, and transnational arenas.²⁹

Contrasting and changing political dynamics in Ladysmith, Newcastle, and elsewhere underscore the importance of highly organized and mobilized popular forces within civil society in defining (and in part becoming) the state, and pointing the way towards alternatives. They help to define, in other words, what Gramsci called “the terrain of the conjunctural” – at the same time as driving home the depth and extent of organizational imperatives. Two recent and ongoing studies in KwaZulu-Natal enrich

²⁸ I develop this argument more fully in Hart (2004b).

²⁹ For example, the Taiwanese industrialist who stood for the Inkatha Freedom Party in the 1996 local government elections in Newcastle is now an ANC member of national parliament!

and extend these arguments.³⁰ What emerges very clearly from these critical ethnographies is that any strategy for mobilization around dispossession as an ongoing process would have to build on the grounds of material and symbolic resources given from the past, but move in new directions.

There are some interesting resonances with an exchange between Arjun Appadurai and Swapna Bannerjee at the opening session of the conference. In support of his claim that a new area studies must go beyond static geographies of land masses to focus on circulatory processes, Appadurai pointed to new forms of transnational activism, and what he called the galactic expansion of groups allying with others. In response, Bannerjee drew on her work among slum dwellers in Mumbai to point out that many residents of these areas actively oppose the sorts of alliances that local and international NGOs are forging with one another, as well as with international financial institutions and different levels of the state. “Slum dwellers know that these alliances are not for them,” Bannerjee declared. Appadurai then conceded that perhaps these questions of alliances can’t be resolved without detailed ethnographic understandings of social formations and processes at play in Mumbai – and that perhaps we are, therefore, driven back to “something quite old”!

This exchange also directs our attention to the analytical and political stakes in how we conceive of spatiality in relation to ethnography as well as to “area studies.” Some years ago, Appadurai (1988a; 1988b) roundly condemned traditional ethnographies through which mobile anthropologists produce knowledge that incarcerates “natives” in bounded localities. This was, at the same time, a critique of conventional area studies and disciplinary practices that map essentialized cultures on to bounded territories, and deploy strategies of “metonymic freezing” through which some aspect of people’s lives come to characterize or stand in for “the culture” as a whole. Appadurai’s complaints resonated with a broadly similar critique by James Clifford (1992), who invoked the metaphor of travel as a means of escape for the ethnographer from the “incarceration of the local” and the stasis of space. This strategy resonates in turn with Appadurai’s (1996) characterization of cultural globalization in terms of deterritorialization, along his insistence on an ethnography “that is not so resolutely localizing,” and that focuses on the unyoking of imagination from place.

Spatial metaphors of travel and disjunctive flows seek to transcend static, bounded, and essentialized conceptions of space, place, and culture, but end up leaving these conceptions – and the forms of power through which they operate – largely intact.³¹

³⁰ See Loftus and Lumsden (2003) for a richly detailed and illuminating account of struggles over water in the township of Inanda outside Durban, and Chari (2004) for a fascinating analysis of struggles over contract labor and environmental degradation in the “coloured” township of Wentworth south of Durban.

³¹ In their discussion of Clifford’s notion of travelling culture, Smith and Katz (1993:79) point out that “‘space’ itself is rendered unproblematic, in startling contrast to the ‘everything flows’ of the social.” Likewise Sparke (forthcoming, chapter 2: 7) points to a profound ambivalence defining Appadurai’s treatment of space: “While most of the time he describes each ‘scape’ as a flow, he does not shy away from activating the concept-metaphor’s appeal to the more spatial connotations of landscape and the related

In concluding, I want to focus on how critical ethnography and what I call relational comparison are grounded in Lefebvrian conceptions of the production of space and scale and how they can contribute to the project of rethinking area studies.

Re-Placing Area Studies? Critical Ethnography & Relational Comparison

Spatial metaphors are problematic in so far as they presume that space is not. And they are problematic in political as much as philosophical terms. The problem lies not with spatial metaphors as such, but with metaphors that depend on a very specific representation of space: *absolute space*. “Absolute space” refers to a conception of space as a field, container, a co-ordinate system of discrete and mutually exclusive locations. Absolute space is the space that is broadly taken for granted in Western societies – our naïvely assumed sense of space as emptiness... And despite its abstract neutrality, absolute space is politically charged... As Lefebvre emphasizes, it is a conception of space appropriate for a project of social domination. (Smith and Katz 1993: 75)

The “place” of traditional ethnography to which Appadurai, Clifford, and many others reacted so strongly in the 1980s derives precisely from the Cartesian representation of space that Lefebvre identified as absolute space. Spatial metaphors fail as a route of escape precisely because they rely on a conception of space as a static container in order to ground meaning (Smith and Katz 1993). Lefebvre’s insistence on a conception of space (or space/time) as actively produced through situated, embodied material practices, and their associated discourses and power relations, is far more radical in its analytical bite and political reach.

From the perspective of critical ethnography and relational comparison, vital importance also attaches to conceptions of place and space. Within and beyond geography, there is a widespread tendency to conceive of “place” as concrete, and “space” as abstract – in other words, a notion of place as space made meaningful. One set of reactions to assertions of deterritorialization and “spaces of flows” has been to draw on precisely this distinction in order to insist that “culture sits in places” and call for a “defence of place.”³²

notions of mapping and navigating one’s way through space... However, in these very moments when he would seem to be injecting the problematics of geography and the production of space into the heart of his argument, Appadurai immediately pulls back, reducing spatiality to the work of the imagination, accounting for it in terms of just the flux of the disjunctive flows, and thereby effectively essentializing the narrative of deterritorialization.”

³² See for example Dirlik (1998) and Escobar (2001) who draws explicitly on Basso (1996) and Casey (1996). For a critique, see Massey (2004).

A Lefebvrian understanding of the production of space decisively rejects this distinction between space and place. As Merrifield (1993: 520) pointed out some time ago, space for Lefebvre is *not* an abstract theorization separated from “the more concrete, tactile domain of place which is frequently taken as synonymous with an easily identifiable reality such as a specific location or locality.” Instead, space and place are *both* conceived in terms of embodied practices and processes of production that are simultaneously material and discursive. From this perspective, place is most usefully understood as nodal points of connection in wider networks of socially-produced space – what Massey (1994) calls an extroverted sense of place. If spatiality is conceived in terms of space-time and formed through social relations and interactions at all scales, then place can be seen as neither a bounded enclosure nor the site of meaning-making, but rather as “a subset of the interactions which constitute [social] space, a local articulation within a wider whole” (Massey 1994: 4). Places are always formed through relations with wider arenas and other places; boundaries are always socially constructed and contested; and the specificity of a place – however defined – arises from the particularity of interrelations with what lies beyond it, that come into conjuncture in specific ways.³³

Critical ethnography and relational comparison build directly on this conception of the production of space and place, and I would like to conclude by drawing out key methodological implications and political stakes. First, though, let me turn to Michael Burawoy’s project of global ethnography, which is situated very firmly on a sociological terrain. Burawoy does not engage explicitly with conceptions of spatiality, still less with geography. Yet own his narrative of how this method has evolved is in fact deeply spatialized, and revolves around changing understandings of the relationship between what he calls “local processes” and “external forces.” In *Ethnography Unbound* (1991), the first edited collection of studies by his students, Burawoy later acknowledged that “The Bay Area was simply the container for our ethnographies. The extralocal was never problematized” (Burawoy 2000: 29). The contributors to *Global Ethnography* (2000), in contrast, grapple directly with “the extension from micro to macro, from local to extralocal, from [local] processes to [global] forces” (Burawoy 2000: 29).³⁴ More recently, Burawoy (2001) has acknowledged that the strategies he and his students developed in *Global Ethnography* did so from the standpoint of *experiences* of globalization. The way forward now for the project of global ethnography, he suggests, is

³³ From this perspective, for example, Ladysmith and Newcastle and their adjacent townships appear not as bounded units, but as points of convergence of wider processes – histories of racialized dispossession during as well as prior to the apartheid era; state and market forces that propelled industries to locate in these areas; and connections with regions in East Asia – as well as interconnected arenas of practice within and across which I sought to engage with the reworking of South African society in the post-apartheid era.

³⁴ These include (1) considering global forces as constituted at a distance, and focusing on how global domination is resisted, avoided, negotiated; (2) seeing global forces as themselves the product of contingent social processes; and (3) viewing global forces and global connections as constituted imaginatively, “inspiring social movements to seize control over their immediate but also their more distant worlds” (Burawoy 2000: 29).

[to] show that not only the experience of globalization but also the very *production of globalization* can be properly the subject of ethnography. What we understand to be ‘global’ is itself constituted within the local; it emanates from very specific agencies, institutions and organizations whose processes can be observed first-hand...From the vantage point of its production, globalization appears more contingent and less inexorable than it does from the standpoint of its experience or reception” (Burawoy 2001: 150; emphasis in original).

Burawoy has, in other words, been moving towards a conception of the production of space. In addition, there are strong parallels between his recognition of the production of globalization, and my own arguments about the dangers of “impact” models of globalization, and the importance of focusing on constitutive processes (Hart 2001; 2002).

Yet, I suggest, a fuller and more explicit embrace of Lefebvrian conceptions of spatiality contributes significantly to using intensive ethnographic studies to do broader analytical and political work. First, a conception of place as nodal points of connection in socially produced space moves us beyond “case studies” to make broader claims – it enables, in other words, a non-positivist understanding of generality.³⁵ In this conception, particularities or specificities arise through *interrelations* between objects, events, places, and identities; and it is through clarifying how these relations are produced and changed in practice that close study of a particular part can generate broader claims and understandings. Such an approach decisively rejects formulations of the impact of “the global” on “the local.” It also underscores the fallacies inherent in notions that concrete studies deal with what is local and particular, whereas abstract theory encompasses general (or global) processes that transcend particular places. This conflation of “the local” with “the concrete” and “the global” with “the abstract” confuses geographical scale with processes of abstraction in thought (Sayer 1991).

Critical conceptions of spatiality are central to what I call relational comparison – a strategy that differs fundamentally from one that deploys ideal types, or that posits different “cases” as local variants of a more general phenomenon. Instead of comparing pre-existing objects, events, places, or identities, the focus is on *how* they are constituted in relation to one another through power-laden practices in the multiple, interconnected

³⁵ Andrew Sayer (1991) spells this out with great clarity by distinguishing between positivist and relational conceptions of generality. Generality₁ refers to widely replicated events or phenomena - i.e. those that are typical or representative as opposed to singular or unique. Generality in this sense derives from a positivist conception of the world as consisting of discrete and atomistic events, objects, and individuals. Relations between the whole and the parts consist of external relations between individuals and the taxonomic groups of which they are a part; a taxonomic group is one whose members share common characteristics but do not necessarily interact; and the whole is equal to the sum of its parts. Generality₂ in contrast refers to something that is large or encompassing in relation to the part on which we are focussing, but to which it is internally or dialectically related - in other words, the whole and the parts presuppose one another.

arenas of everyday life. Clarifying these connections and mutual processes of constitution – as well as slippages, openings, and contradictions – helps to generate new understandings of the possibilities for social change.

Thus, for example, divergent but interconnected trajectories of socio-spatial change in Ladysmith and Newcastle dramatize the local state as a key locus of contradictions in the neoliberal post-apartheid order – what Gramsci would have termed “the terrain of the conjunctural” – along with connections to other key sites. Links between East Asia and South Africa through the medium of Taiwanese investment illustrate another dimension of relational comparison – namely, how bringing diverse but connected historical geographies into tension with one another helps to render taken-for-granted categories peculiar and open to question, as well as pointing to new connections, claims, and re-articulations. Relational comparison also focuses attention on the production of racial, ethnic, and gendered forms of difference as active constitutive forces propelling divergent trajectories of socio-spatial change – and as crucial to any strategy of forging alliances.

Finally let me return to the broad questions of rethinking “area studies” laid out in the introduction. In responding to the challenges that Edward Said lays down in “Orientalism Reconsidered” (2002 [1986]), Coronil (1996) suggests that we focus attention on unsettling Occidentalism – understood not as the reverse of Orientalism, but as its condition of possibility rooted in asymmetrical relations of global power that establish a specific bond between knowledge and power. Occidentalism, in this view, refers to an ensemble of representational practices that separate the world’s components into bounded units, disaggregate their relational histories, turn difference into hierarchy, and naturalize these representations.

The imperatives for foregrounding what Coronil calls non-imperial geohistorical categories assume intense urgency in a post-9/11 world in which the likes of Thomas Barnett and Samuel Huntington are at the helm of producing official knowledges that bound world regions in dangerous new ways. Relational understandings of the production of space and scale are crucial for forcing attention to the mutually constitutive processes through which metropolises and (post)colonies make and remake one another. In addition, attending to interconnections that circumvent the US and Europe can be productive of fresh insights into broader constitutive processes, as well as new possibilities for social change.

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