



Relational comparison revisited: Marxist postcolonial geographies in practice*

Progress in Human Geography

2018, Vol. 42(3) 371–394

© The Author(s) 2016

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0309132516681388

journals.sagepub.com/home/phg**Gillian Hart**

University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, and University of California Berkeley, USA

Abstract

This article revisits the idea of relational comparison that grew out of my earlier research in post-apartheid South Africa in order to put it to work in new ways. First I clarify distinctively different modalities of ‘comparison’ and their political stakes, and go on to specify how the ‘relational’ in relational comparison refers to an open, non-teleological conception of dialectics at the core of Marx’s method. I then engage with sharply polarized urban studies and subaltern studies debates cast in terms of Marxism vs. postcolonialism/poststructuralism and suggest how distinctions among comparative modalities help to reconfigure the terms of the debates. The article lays the groundwork for a larger project that focuses on understanding resurgent nationalisms, populisms, and racisms in different regions of the world in relation to one another in the era of neoliberal forms of capitalism. More broadly I suggest how relational comparison, extended to include conjunctural analysis, can be used as a method for practicing Marxist postcolonial geographies.

Keywords

dialectics, Marxist method, postcolonialism, relational comparison

[P]eoples of the world outside of Euro-America have been forced to live lives comparatively by virtue of experiencing some form of colonization or subjection enforced by the specter of imperialism. The experience of living comparatively inevitably disclosed the instrumentalizing force of classificatory strategies promoted by the imperial dominant that invariably hierarchized relationships everywhere colonialism and imperialism spread. (Harootunian, 2005: 26)

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

I Introduction

Let me start with the late Fernando Coronil, with whom I ended the last article I wrote on relational comparison (Hart, 2006). In conversation with Edward Said, Coronil (1996) suggests that we focus attention on unsettling

*A version of this article was presented as the Progress in Human Geography Lecture at the American Association of Geographers Conference, San Francisco, 1 April 2016.

Corresponding author:

Gillian Hart, Department of Geography, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA.

Email: hart@berkeley.edu

histories, turn difference into hierarchy, and naturalize these representations. Coronil goes on to show how otherwise critical accounts of capitalism and colonialism often end up re-inscribing what Jim Blaut (1993) called *The Colonizer's Model of the World*, which he defines in terms of Eurocentric diffusionism. Coronil's analysis, which derives from a critical re-reading of Marx by Henri Lefebvre (1991 [1974]), was central to my earlier work on relational comparison. Over the past decade, as my attention has increasingly turned to resurgent nationalisms and populist politics in South Africa and elsewhere (especially but not exclusively India) in the era of neoliberal forms of capitalism, Coronil's work has remained central to my understandings. At the same time, I have been compelled to re-examine relational comparison in order to put it to work in new ways. This rethinking has also been stimulated and provoked by urban studies and subaltern studies debates cast in terms of Marxism vs. post-colonialism/poststructuralism – in both of which questions of comparison are front and center, either implicitly or explicitly. A key issue in both debates is what might be entailed in a non-Eurocentric conception of the world. In calling into question the distinctions and terms of both debates, my aim is to rethink relational comparison more explicitly as part of a spatio-historical method of Marxist postcolonial analysis – bearing in mind the inseparability of theory and method, and a concern for praxis.

At the outset, though, I want to make clear that this article is *not* intended as a manifesto. Rather than prescribing what should be done, I am trying to show where my practical engagements have taken me, and how critically rethinking questions of comparison offers an avenue for moving beyond these sharply polarized debates. I do want to insist, though, on the imperative for attending to the simultaneously analytical, methodological and political stakes of how we formulate and use comparative strategies. For me, political stakes are front and center, and determine my analytical and

methodological moves. Political stakes are especially important since much of what travels under the banner of 'comparison' tends to be deeply retrograde. Lisa Lowe (2005), for example, argues that it was with Weber that comparison became an institutionalized method for producing modern knowledge through the ideal-type of Western rationality and deviations from it. Mediated through a much longer history of colonialism, racism, and slavery, she argues, this ideal-type operated as an apparatus for apprehending and disciplining otherness, and carried over into modernization studies in the post-war period. Yet, as the epigraph by Harry Harootunian suggests, comparison can operate as a means of critical engagement as well as a tool of oppression. I have found some of the most compelling and illuminating recent debates around questions of comparison in relation to postcolonial concerns in the field of comparative literature – most notably in the work of Shu-Mei Shih (2013).¹

In revisiting the idea of relational comparison I am going to make three moves. The first is to pose the question: what is the 'relational' in 'relational comparison' as I understand it? This question is important because there are multiple meanings of relationality at play in contemporary debates, some of which are quite incommensurate with one another. The short answer is: it's dialectical, but not in the way most people think of dialectics as a teleological Hegelian monster slouching inexorably towards an appalling totalitarian 'totality' that imposes uniformity on heterogeneity. I want to reach out to those for whom the very term 'dialectics' provokes an allergic reaction, and try to persuade them that there are ways of thinking about dialectics that are neither teleological nor totalizing – and that provide a comparative analytic that is both methodologically useful and politically enabling. I also bring this conception of dialectics into critical dialogue with the work of David Harvey.

The second move is to bring these concepts and distinctions to bear on sharply polarized urban studies and subaltern studies debates,

both of which are cast in terms of Marxism vs. postcolonialism/poststructuralism. Drawing on Philip McMichael's (1990) critical distinctions among different forms of comparison, I argue that analyses coded as 'Marxist' in both sets of debates deploy a form of comparison that asserts a general or encompassing process, and then considers specific 'cases' as variants of that process. Such encompassing claims are problematic for a variety of reasons. Rejecting any notion of pre-given 'cases' or variants of a presumed universal/general process, relational comparison focuses instead on spatio-historical specificities as well as interconnections and mutually constitutive processes – crucial to which is the non-teleological, open conception of dialectics outlined above. From the perspective of this conception of dialectics, I call into question the necessary elision of postcolonialism and poststructuralism, and point as well to limits shared by both sides of the subaltern studies debate.

Third, I return to Coronil and related critiques of Eurocentrism to suggest key elements of an alternative spatio-historical Marxist postcolonial approach, in which relational comparison can be used as a practical tool of analysis. As part of this argument, I outline how my efforts to deepen relational comparison to engage questions of nationalism have taken me in a more explicitly conjunctural direction. Essentially what this conjunctural move entails is bringing key forces at play in South Africa and other regions of the world into the same frame of analysis, as connected yet distinctively different nodes in globally interconnected historical geographies – and as sites in the production of global processes in specific spatio-historical conjunctures, rather than as just recipients of them. I also reflect more broadly on the methodological entailments of an open, non-teleological conception of dialectics.

Before launching into these arguments, let me say something briefly and schematically about where relational comparison came from; the work I needed it to do then; and why I think

it needs revision and extension to help me move in directions I want to go. These concrete engagements have shaped the arguments I make throughout the article.

II Roots and routes of relational comparison

The idea of relational comparison grew out of the first phase of my research in post-apartheid South Africa (1994–2000/1), but its roots go back to the early 1990s when I returned to South Africa after having been away for nearly 20 years. Since then I have been utterly caught up in the twists and turns and vicissitudes of the ongoing transition from apartheid, and trying to understand them in relation to forces at play in other regions of the world. Returning to South Africa coincided with my becoming a geographer after having been trained as an economist (albeit of the rogue variety). I was initially drawn in to geography by the locality debates in the late 1980s, and went on from there to Lefebvre, Massey, and a lot of other geography literature that blew my mind – and gave me incredibly powerful tools to work with.

In 1994, immediately after the election that brought the African National Congress (ANC) to power, I began work in Ladysmith and Newcastle, two former white towns and adjacent black townships, 100 km apart. Thanks to Massey's (1994) extraverted sense of place, I saw them not as towns (let alone cities) or any sort of bounded unit – but as points of coming together of three key processes:

- a) historical processes of racialized dispossession that intensified in the apartheid era when millions of black South Africans were herded into huge townships in the former bantustans – many of them adjacent to far smaller towns designated 'white' by apartheid authorities;
- b) apartheid projects of decentralizing industries to the borders of these areas

to prevent black South Africans from migrating to metropolitan areas, and then taking advantage of the captive labor force;

- c) the movement of large numbers of small-scale Taiwanese industrialists into these areas since the early 1980s.

I set out to trace how these processes were changing in relation to one another in the transition from apartheid and the remaking of local government; and I have been working there ever since, more or less intensively at different moments.

What initially drew me to these places in the early 1990s were so-called expert knowledges invoking ‘lessons from elsewhere’ – two of which were particularly important (Hart, 2002). First were efforts to urge South Africa to emulate market-friendly East Asian ‘miracles’; this was a precursor to discourses of neoliberal globalization, and profoundly misrepresented East Asian trajectories of accumulation. Second was a sharply polarized debate in the World Bank over whether South Africa’s future would and should be metropolitan or based on revived peasant production. This debate ignored the racialized spaces that were neither urban nor rural, as well as the spatially extended lives of many black South Africans. Instead of contesting these debates in more or less abstract terms, I wanted to produce concrete counter-knowledges situated in the arenas of everyday life.

The ANC’s embrace of neoliberal economic policies began in earnest in 1995 with the lowering of tariff barriers, and over the second half of the 1990s I watched with growing dismay three key processes unfolding before my eyes: the collapse of entire labor-intensive industries; sharp reductions in central government spending on local government in the name of neoliberal austerity that provoked growing conflict over payment for water and electricity; and the ravages wrought by HIV/AIDS

denialism. At the same time we witnessed massive and accelerating capital flight, and huge spending on a corrupt arms deal initially brokered by the apartheid state. Not surprisingly, by the early 2000s these forces generated a significant upsurge of oppositional movements (Hart, 2014).

Relational comparison as concept and method emerged from my efforts to think about the interconnections between South Africa and East Asia around questions of land, labor, and capital, as well as the contradictory imperatives of the local state playing out in Ladysmith and Newcastle. My book *Disabling Globalization: Places of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa* was published to coincide with the World Summit on Sustainable Development in August 2002. It also coincided with the apogee of oppositional movements, and I came under heavy pressure from a number of participants to spell out more fully the political stakes of my arguments. The idea that crystalized as relational comparison was also the product of dialogical and practical engagements in Ladysmith and Newcastle, through which my interlocutors were also deeply interested in why political dynamics in the two seemingly similar places were playing out so differently, and our growing recognition of the mutually illuminating insights that came from thinking through them in relation to one another.²

I posited relational comparison in opposition to two other methods of comparison. First, by far the most common approach is based on pre-given bounded units or ‘cases’; it includes Weberian ideal-types, but much else besides. Second is the sort of approach that asserts an overarching general process, and sees comparative cases as variants of this process. Instead of comparing pre-existing objects, events, places, or identities – or asserting a general process like globalization and comparing its ‘impacts’ – I argued that the focus of relational comparison is on *how* key processes are constituted in relation to one another through power-laden

practices in the multiple, interconnected arenas of everyday life; and that ‘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’ (Hart, 2006: 996). What animated me was how relational understandings of the production of space and place enabled broader claims on the basis of in-depth historical ethnographies, *and* the critical political possibilities of such moves.

Most important, I tried to use relational comparison to engage political debates and imperatives around three key sets of issues:

- a) I argued that local government was emerging as a key site of contradictions in the post-apartheid era – but also how these contradictions were constituted through entirely different political struggles and dynamics in two seemingly similar places 100 km apart. Hence the imperative for left forces outside the ANC to take seriously the diverse but interconnected struggles in local arenas, focusing on *both* specificities *and* interconnections.
- b) Drawing on connections between South Africa and East Asia, I called attention to how rapid industrialization in Taiwan and China had been underwritten by redistributive land reforms – and how this helped to denaturalize extreme forms of racialized dispossession in South Africa, both historically and in the present. I suggested as well how this analysis could be used to challenge calls to expand employment by lowering wages, and highlighted the political possibilities of drawing on these interconnections to re-articulate the land question as far more than a rural/agrarian phenomenon.
- c) Together, I argued that these two axes of relational comparison – the two towns

and South Africa/East Asia – call into question what I called ‘impact models’ of globalization, and underscore the imperative for focusing on constitutive processes.

Relational conceptions of the production of space were, and remain, central to the analytical and political stakes of relational comparison, along with critical ethnography – the dialogical and practical engagements mentioned earlier, through which I came to a deeper understanding of the multiple forces and relations at play in both places and their trans-local connections.

In my ongoing efforts to follow the post-apartheid transition, I have now come to see 2001 as a key turning point. This was the moment when new and (for me) utterly unexpected dynamics began to take shape in the decade of the 2000s:

- a) Despite significantly increased central government spending on local government and rising social grants, struggles over local government intensified dramatically – local government went from *a* to *the* key site of contradictions.
- b) Over the decade we witnessed proliferating expressions of popular discontent that far exceeded the organizational capacity of social movements, most of which collapsed quite quickly, giving way to what I have called ‘movement beyond movements’.
- c) During this same period multiple articulations of nationalism – both official and popular – escalated dramatically in relation to one another as part of an explosion of populist politics very different from those in the first phase of the post-apartheid order.

My book *Rethinking the South African Crisis* (2014) was an effort to come to grips with these processes. Although focused on South Africa, I

was constantly rubbing up against a series of Indian debates, including but by no means limited to subaltern studies – and, as I explain later, several key arguments grew out of these engagements. I was also compelled by the parallel and divergent processes taking shape in India and South Africa – more specifically, the coincidence since the early 1990s of neoliberal forms of capitalism ushered in by the parties of liberation that generated rising inequality and ‘surplus’ populations; popular expressions of democracy that far exceed liberal democracy; and escalating and proliferating nationalisms – all entangled with gender power and shot through with race (South Africa) and caste and communalism (India). My interest in India intensified in 2014 when Narendra Modi took power – exemplifying the resurgence of right-wing nationalisms (some would say fascisms), populist politics, and intensifying racisms as a much broader phenomenon in the world today. These include, of course, Donald Trump’s United States and many parts of Europe, as the refugee crisis and the Brexit vote have made vividly clear.

In short: the imperative to engage questions of nationalism, populism, and racism in relation to other formations of power and difference, as well as to the destructions (and seductions) of global capitalism, has propelled me to revisit relational comparison as a method for putting into practice a broader and more open conception of Marxist postcolonial geographies – at the core of which is a non-teleological conception of dialectics. Before spelling out more fully what I mean by this conception and why it is important to deepening relational comparison, I first need to clarify three distinctively different modalities of comparison.

III Modalities of comparison

In thinking more fully about questions of comparison, let me start with a mea culpa: a major lacuna in my work on relational comparison was

the failure to engage with Philip McMichael’s work on comparison, including his concept of incorporated comparison. In a powerfully illuminating article entitled ‘Incorporating Comparison within a World-Historical Perspective’ published in 1990, McMichael distinguishes in careful detail three distinctively different comparative strategies and tactics:

- a) ‘Analytic comparison’ aspires to scientific rigor on the basis of preconceived, discrete bounded units, in which the relationship between units or ‘cases’ is external – in other words, they are not changed in their relations with one another, and the cases ‘are abstracted from their time/place setting’ (1990: 389).
- b) ‘Encompassing comparison’ is a term coined by Charles Tilly (1984: 147) in contrast to analytic comparison as a way of ‘taking account of the interconnectedness of ostensibly separate experiences and providing a strong incentive to ground analyses explicitly in the historical contexts of the structures and processes they include’. This strategy entails ‘select[ing] locations within [a large] structure or process and explain [ing] similarities or differences as *consequences* of their relationships to the whole’ (1984: 123, emphasis added). McMichael shows that, although Wallerstein’s (1983) world system approach differs from Tilly’s analysis, both *presume* a ‘whole’ that governs its ‘parts’ – in other words, ‘totality’ operates as an empirical or conceptual *premise*. What I called an ‘impact model’ of globalization in my earlier work can be seen as a form of encompassing comparison. In this article I will draw on McMichael’s incisive critique to argue that a wide array of seemingly quite diverse analyses in effect deploy forms

of encompassing comparison, and point to further problems inherent in this approach.

- c) ‘Incorporated comparison’, McMichael shows, addresses the limits of encompassing comparison while holding on to a world-historical perspective. Instead of a predefined ‘whole’ or encompassing process, ‘totality’ operates as a conceptual *procedure*, ‘discovered through analysis of the mutual conditioning of the parts’ (1990: 391). He is drawing here on Marx’s method laid out in the 1857 introduction to the *Grundrisse* of developing concrete concepts as the product of multiple relations and determinations.

There are very close affinities between McMichael’s use of incorporated comparison and my use of relational comparison. First, we draw similar distinctions among different strategies of comparison, although his analysis of the first two forms of comparison is far more fully developed than mine.³ In addition, we are using very similar readings of Marx’s method and working with closely related conceptions of dialectics cast in non-teleological terms – a point that I will elaborate below. There are, however, key differences between incorporated comparison and relational comparison that turn around conceptions of space/time. For McMichael, incorporated comparison can take two forms: (1) a multiple form, in which instances are analyzed as products of a continuously evolving process in and across time; and (2) a singular form, analyzing variation in or across space within a world-historical conjuncture. He points out, though, that these foci are not mutually exclusive – and provides as an example how his work on settler agrarian systems in the United States and Australia in the 19th century tries to link spatial and temporal dimensions. He does, nevertheless, seem to be working with dichotomous conceptions

of space as a passive backdrop and time as an active force.

Relational comparison differs from incorporated comparison in three related ways, all influenced by the work of Henri Lefebvre. Most fundamentally, relational comparison is grounded in Lefebvre’s (1991 [1974]) relational conception of the production of space (or space/time) that refuses the conventional separation of space and time, as well as in Doreen Massey’s (1994) related conception of place as nodal points of interconnection in socially produced space/time. Second, relational comparison is closely linked with critical ethnography and together they are influenced by Lefebvre’s focus on praxis and the critique of everyday life as essential to the analysis of larger processes. Incorporating both the production of space and close attention to everyday life, Lefebvre’s ‘regressive-progressive method’ constitutes the third key influence on relational comparison that distinguishes it from incorporated comparison. Lefebvre developed this method in the context of his research in the Pyrenees in the early 1950s and returned to it in *The Production of Space*, asking ‘how *could* we come to understand . . . the genesis of the present, along with the preconditions and processes involved, other than by starting in the present, working our way back to the past, and then retracing our steps?’ (1991 [1974]: 66, emphasis in original).⁴ Stuart Elden reports that, when praised by Sartre for this method, Lefebvre retorted that Sartre should learn to read Marx: ‘For Lefebvre, this [regressive-progressive method] is the dialectic at work, in the way that was discovered by Marx and has been “obscured since in the heart of Marxism”’ (Elden, 2004: 38–39). In other words, as Nathan Sayre (2008) has pointed out, the regressive-progressive method, along with the broader argument of *The Production of Space*, constitute an explicitly spatialized understanding of Marx’s method.

Later in this article I will show how my rethinking of relational comparison has

included paying closer attention to the regressive-progressive method, and linking it to an explicitly conjunctural analysis as part of a spatio-historical Marxist postcolonial approach that builds on the work of Fernando Coronil. Making this move requires going back to basics – most crucially to the conception of dialectics at the core of Marx’s (and Lefebvre’s) method – in order to clarify the simultaneously analytical, methodological, and political stakes of an open, non-teleological conception of dialectics grounded in praxis and in spatio-historical processes.

IV De-demonizing dialectics

My reading of Marx and understanding of dialectics draw directly on Bertell Ollman’s (1971, 2003) exposition of what Marx did and did not take from Hegel. By far the most common presumption is that Marx performed a materialist inversion of Hegel’s idealist understanding of dialectics, while retaining his teleological tendencies. In Ollman’s reading, Marx did not just render Hegel’s idealism in materialist terms. Rather, he took from Hegel the philosophy of internal relations and rejected much else – including, I would add, the deeply problematic *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* – producing in the process a distinctively open and non-teleological conception of dialectics.⁵

Here I provide a summary of dialectics in terms of the philosophy of internal relations, and then explain where it comes from:

- a) The focus is on *processes*, not *things*: the principle is that elements, things, and structures do not exist prior to the processes and relations that create, sustain, or undermine them.
- b) Dialectics forces us always to ask of every ‘thing’ or ‘event’ by what process was it constituted and how is it sustained?
- c) ‘Things’ and ‘systems’ that many regard as irreducible are seen in dialectical thought as internally *contradictory* by virtue of the multiple processes that constitute them. A contradiction here refers to ‘a union of two or more internally related processes that constitute them’.
- d) Things are always assumed to be internally heterogeneous (i.e. contradictory) at every level. There are no irreducible building blocks, and all categories are capable of dissolution.
- e) Parts and wholes are mutually constitutive of each other – but note also Ollman’s (1971: 34) observation: ‘Whereas Hegel offers a large assortment of terms in which he attempts to capture the whole (Absolute Idea, Spirit, God, Universal, Truth), Marx does not offer any . . . [rather he focuses on] the internal nature of the tie between the parts (whatever parts), and *not on the function of the whole qua whole in clarifying these ties* . . . Spinoza and Hegel devote considerable attention to what they take to be the totality [whereas] Leibniz and Marx do not’ (emphasis added).
- f) Ongoing change/transformation is inherent and holds out political possibilities. Here again is Ollman (2003: 20): ‘With dialectics we are made to question what kind of changes are already occurring and what kind of changes are possible. The dialectic is revolutionary, as Bertolt Brecht points out, because it helps to pose such questions in a manner that makes effective action possible.’
- g) Dialectical enquiry is itself a process that produces concepts, abstractions, and institutionalized structures of knowledge. Also, relations between researcher and researched are not those of an outsider looking in on the researched as object, but between two

active subjects, each of whom internalizes something from the other by virtue of the processes that connect them. More generally, as Derek Sayer (1987: 126) puts it, there is no Archimedean point from which knowledge can be produced.

- h) In addition, dialectical enquiry necessarily incorporates ethical, moral, and political choices/values into its own process and sees its constructed knowledges as discourses in the play of power.⁶

At this point I want to bring David Harvey into the conversation. The eight-point summary of dialectics through internal relations in fact comes from Chapter 2 of Harvey's *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (1996), which, as Eric Sheppard (2008a: 133) has pointed out, Harvey regards as his finest work on dialectics. Harvey draws very directly on Ollman, from whom I have spliced some additional commentary into Harvey's useful summary. Very importantly, what Harvey adds to Ollman is a refusal to separate space and time that comes directly from Lefebvre (although he also insists on the importance of Leibniz):

Space and time are neither absolute nor external processes but are contingent and contained within them. There are multiple spaces and times (and space-times) implicated in different . . . processes. The latter all *produce* – to use Lefebvre's (1991 [1974]) terminology – their own forms of space and time. Processes do not operate *in* but *actively construct* space and time and in so doing define distinctive scales for their development. (Harvey, 1996: 53, emphases in original)

Although Ollman and Harvey both subscribe to the philosophy of internal relations, they diverge sharply on questions of method. These questions are especially important, since some critics have likened this philosophy to being dunked in a giant bowl of spaghetti from which it is impossible to claw one's way out. In *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method*

(2003), Ollman provides a lucid exposition of what it means in practice to work with the method that Marx laid out in the 1857 Introduction to the *Grundrisse*: starting from the 'real concrete' (the world as it presents itself to us), and proceeding through processes of 'abstraction' (from the Latin *abstrahere*, to pull from) to construct concrete concepts that are the product of multiple relations and determinations, and are adequate to the concrete in history.

Ollman (2003: 60–63) usefully distinguishes four distinct senses in which Marx used the term 'abstraction': first as a verb, denoting the mental activity of subdividing the world into the constructs with which we think about it, and second as a noun, to define the results of this process – both of which are the methodological entailments of the philosophy of internal relations. Marx also used 'abstraction' in a third sense to refer to 'a suborder of particularly ill-fitting mental constructs' that are inadequate to grasping their subject matter because they are too narrow. And fourth, what Marx called 'real abstractions' are the product of the functioning of capitalism and operate as active forces in the world by foregrounding certain boundaries and connections while obscuring others, thus 'making what is in practice inseparable appear separate and the historically specific features of things disappear behind their general forms'.

Two important complements to Ollman's exposition of Marx's method are Stuart Hall's 'Marx's Notes on Method: A "Reading" of the "1857 Introduction"' (2003 [1974]) and Derek Sayer's *The Violence of Abstraction* (1987), both of whom underscore Marx's insistence on historical specificity and commitment to an 'empirical method of inquiry – albeit importantly not an empiricist one' (Sayer, 1987: 147). Likewise for Hall, Marx's method 'retains the concrete empirical reference as a privileged and undissolved "moment" within a theoretical analysis without thereby making it "empiricist"; the concrete analysis of concrete situations' (2003: 128). Both also make clear the

distinctively non-teleological character of Marx's dialectical method – what Hall (1986) has aptly called 'Marxism without guarantees' – and the fallacy of attributing to Marx simply a materialist inversion of Hegel's idealism. Of great importance as well is Hall's exposition of the concept of articulation as a crucial element of Marx's method of advancing to the concrete through multiple relations and determinations. The classic reference here is Hall's essay 'Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance' (1980), in which he deployed a specific concept of articulation to powerful effect in the context of debates over race and class in South Africa at the time.⁷

Rather than the bowl of spaghetti problem, Ollman (2003: 19) highlights two key dangers of dialectical method that derive from inadequate attention to spatio-historical/empirical specificity and complexity. Dialectical thinkers often 'play down or even ignore the parts, the details, in deference to making generalizations about the whole' – in other words, there is a tendency to gloss over the specific parts and their interconnections. In addition, he argues, dialectical thinkers 'have a tendency to move too quickly to the bottom line, to push the germ of a development to its finished form' – a tendency that derives from 'not giving enough attention to the complex mediations, both in space and over time, that make up the joints of any social problem'.

Although Harvey avoids this dichotomous formulation of space and time, his approach to the methodological challenges of dialectics through internal relations entails staking out 'a commitment to parsimony and generality with respect to processes (though not to things or systems)' (1996: 58):

[D]ialectics *does* seek a path towards a certain kind of ontological security, or reductionism – not a reductionism to 'things' but to an understanding of common generative processes and relations. *In this way we can conceive, for*

example, of a common process of capital circulation giving rise to an infinite variety of physical city landscapes and social forms. (Harvey, 1996: 58, emphasis added)

It is at this point that I differ sharply from Harvey, even though we both subscribe to Ollman's interpretation of dialectics in terms of internal relations, and we both read Ollman through a Lefebvorean lens that refuses to separate space and time. Precisely what he's proposing here resembles what McMichael (and Tilly) call an encompassing strategy – positing a general process a priori, of which specific 'cases' are variations. Harvey's self-confessed parsimony also embodies the tendency, echoing Ollman, to 'gloss over specific parts and their interconnections' and to give short shrift to complex mediations on the presumption that they are simply – or maybe first and foremost – the *effects* of a 'common generative process'.⁸

Harvey's reductionist predilections have long been the focus of sustained critique, especially from feminist geographers who have made clear the analytical as well as the political costs of his preferences for parsimony. Cindi Katz (2008: 241), for example, points out that:

People might recognize themselves and all the messiness of their affiliations and antagonisms in a notion of class that doesn't encompass, but is faceted by – as it simultaneously cuts through – gender, race, sexuality, nation. It's not just that the category of class would be altered by this engagement, but the engagement itself might provoke a different way of working with theory and praxis.

In another important appreciative critique, Melissa Wright (2008: 101) takes Harvey to task for 'the dual assumption that differences can be recognized as such and then that, through negotiation or agreement or some other enlightenment appeal to reason, these differences can be put aside for strategic purposes'. Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag* (2007) vividly illustrates the dangers of

reductionist understandings. The political stakes are significant because, as Hall (1985: 111) pointed out some time ago, ‘we can think of political situations in which alliances could be drawn in very different ways, depending on which of the articulations in play become the dominant ones’.

These arguments help to underscore the limits of encompassing approaches in addition to those that McMichael (1990) identifies. Most immediately, they turn around the problematic refusal to recognize race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and other dimensions of difference as actively constitutive forces. In addition, as I discuss more fully later in relation to subaltern studies debates, encompassing assertions frequently rest either implicitly or explicitly on precisely the core-centric, diffusionist presumptions that are the target of postcolonial critique. Constitutive differences glossed over by encompassing approaches are not only crucial to any project of forging alliances across registers of difference. They are central as well to identifying slippages, openings, and contradictions, and to illuminating what sorts of changes are possible in specific spatio-historical conjunctures.

Going back to the earlier discussion of modalities of comparison, both relational comparison and McMichael’s conception of incorporated comparison explicitly and emphatically refuse to assert any a priori general or universal process. In different although related ways outlined above, we both argue that claims about generality have to be *produced* through close attention to the multiple relations and determinations at the core of Marx’s method. Precisely these ‘complex mediations . . . that make up the joints of any social problem’, as Ollman puts it, are what is at stake in an open, non-teleological conception of dialectics and in a relational, non-positivist understanding of generality.

In the concluding section of this article I outline how I have tried to deepen relational

comparison by focusing more specifically on Lefebvre’s regressive progressive method in combination with conjunctural analysis in order to address questions of nationalism. I also suggest how this revision relates more broadly to Marxist postcolonial geographies. As the next step in forging this argument, I will now circuit through urban studies and subaltern studies debates cast in terms of Marxism vs. postcolonialism/poststructuralism, and suggest how distinguishing modalities of comparison and focusing on an open conception of dialectics help to reframe these debates.

V Engaging debates: Urban studies and subaltern studies

In recent years multiple sessions of the AAG have been riven by fierce – and deeply gendered – debates in the field of urban studies in which terms such as the ‘epistemic privileging of Northern cities’ and ‘aspirations to universal theory’ have come into collision with those who insist on the constitutive significance of historical difference. With the publication of Vivek Chibber’s (2013) ferocious attack on subaltern studies – including Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2000) *Provincializing Europe* – urban studies and subaltern studies debates have increasingly come to resonate with one another.

Concerned by this widening schism, several geographers have issued calls for comparative analysis to help resolve these differences (e.g. Peck, 2015; Leitner and Sheppard, 2016). The question remains, though, as to precisely which comparative analytics can actually do this work.⁹ Jennifer Robinson’s recent article in this journal, ‘Thinking Cities through Elsewhere’ (2016a), makes the important point that questions of comparison require going back to analytical basics. She does so by turning to readings of Lefebvre and Deleuze, as well as Althusser. Although I agree on the need to return to basics, I do so by drawing on the preceding analysis of distinctively different modalities of comparison

to argue that both sets of debates are caught up in problematic encompassing claims, and to suggest how a revised form of relational comparison – with its open, non-teleological dialectics – helps to reframe the debates and take them in different directions.

VI Urban studies debates

In her progress report on urban studies, Kate Derickson (2015) draws on Chakrabarty's categories of History 1 and 2 in *Provincializing Europe* (2000) to identify what she calls Urbanization 1 and 2. Urbanization 1, coded as Marxist, encompasses the work of Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid (2014, 2015) as well as Andy Merrifield (2012, 2013), who draw on a reading of Lefebvre's (2003) *The Urban Revolution* to make extensive claims about planetary urbanization. Scott and Storper's (2015) attempt 'to build a general theory of the urban' from a non-Marxist perspective presumably also falls in the category of Urbanization 1. In sharp contrast, Derickson defines Urbanization 2 to include those doing 'urbanization from below', drawing on poststructural and postcolonial theory to 'refuse Eurocentrism and provincialize urban theory that has grown out of European and North American cities'.

From the perspective of arguments developed in the preceding discussion, I suggest that what Derickson (2015) terms 'Urbanization 1' is not a matter of 'Marxism' but of analyses that assert 'common generative processes' of which particular 'cases' are variations – in other words, analyses that deploy a form of encompassing comparison and claim authority in terms of the generality of their analyses. Such strategies are by no means limited to Marxism (of whatever stripe), although many who deploy encompassing strategies do indeed situate their analyses in Marxist lineages. Thus, for example, notions of 'planetary urbanism' set forth by Brenner and Schmid (2014, 2015) and Merrifield (2013) can be seen as instances of

encompassing strategies, along with a limited reading of Lefebvre.¹⁰ Also encompassing – although purged of any sort of Marxism – are Scott and Storper's (2015: 1) claims that 'All cities can be understood in terms of a theoretical framework that combines two main processes, namely, the dynamics of agglomeration/polarization, and the unfolding of an associated nexus of locations, land, uses and human interactions'. What is so limiting and problematic about this sort of strategy, as we have seen, is that it leaps over constitutive differences. In addition, assertions of encompassing processes typically go hand-in-hand with explicit or implicit presumptions that such processes take shape in the Euro-American 'core' and radiate out from there – a point I return to in the context of subaltern studies debates.

Apropos the urban studies debate, let me turn now to recent work by Jennifer Robinson (2016a, 2016b) and Ananya Roy (2015, 2016). Clearly there are affinities between what I am trying to do and what both of them are doing. Most obviously, we are all deeply suspicious of efforts that assert overarching processes and reduce spatio-historical difference to empirical variation; we all share a commitment to an approach that is closely attentive to constitutive processes arising out of multiple arenas of practice; and we are all profoundly critical of Eurocentric forms of analysis. Yet there are also significant differences among the three of us. Although we all subscribe to relational forms of understanding, each of us is working with distinctively different conceptions of relationality. Robinson's deployment of Deleuzian assemblages is quite different from Roy's deconstructive approach; and both diverge from the philosophy of internal relations and open conceptions of dialectics that I find useful. The most immediate question – deserving of greater attention than I can devote here – is what are the distinctive insights yielded by these different analytical frameworks? More generally, rather than pitting Marxism against poststructuralism,

it seems to me that there are compelling and potentially productive debates to be had around the analytical, methodological and political stakes of these different conceptions of relationality – along with their possible complementarities as well as their irreducible differences.

Since I am suggesting a renewed conversation on the relations between dialectics and poststructuralisms, it is useful to reflect briefly on a 2008 special issue of *Environment and Planning A* on geography, dialectics, and poststructuralisms. What is striking about a number of the contributions to this collection is the tendency to define ‘the dialectic’ in Hegelian terms, or to claim that Marx performed a materialist inversion of Hegel’s idealism, thus invoking a problematically teleological Hegelian Marxism. In a more accommodating vein than several other contributions, Eric Sheppard (2008b: 2610) maintains that ‘dialectics can be a much broader, open-ended, less totalizing, nonteleological, and perhaps more radical, form of reasoning, with underexplored affinities to poststructural human geography’. He recognizes Harvey’s affinities with Ollman – as well as his (Harvey’s) reductionist tendencies. In making the case for convergence between dialectics and poststructuralisms, Sheppard draws primarily on Roy Bhaskar’s (1993) realist conception of dialectics, and Manuel DeLanda’s (2006) similarly realist reading of Deleuzian assemblages. Yet Sheppard also acknowledges the limits to DeLanda’s version of assemblages – in much the same way that Ollman (2003: 173–81) highlights those of Bhaskar’s version of dialectics. Sheppard describes his approach as a ‘smash-and-grab philosophy’, on the grounds that ‘an obsession with philosophical foundations and ontological fidelity can also divert from practical emancipatory agendas’ (2008b: 2604).

The danger, though, is that Sheppard’s provocative claims about the possibilities enabled by a non-teleological and open-ended conception of dialectics can too easily be dismissed. If

there is to be a reconsideration of dialectics in relation to diverse forms of poststructuralism, it needs to start from a far clearer understanding of distinctively different conceptions of dialectics – as well as with a challenge to stereotyped understandings of a necessarily totalizing Marxist teleology. Rather than obsessive pedantry, this is a matter of political stakes that I have been arguing all along are very high.

VII Subaltern studies debates¹¹

These considerations are especially important to questions of postcolonialism – and to the fierce debate provoked by Chibber’s (2013) attack on subaltern studies in general, and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (2000) in particular. The key target of *Provincializing Europe* is historicism, understood in Hegelian terms as that which ‘made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather as something that became global *over time*, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it’ – thus consigning ‘Indians, Africans, and other “rude” nations to an imaginary waiting room of history’ (Chakrabarty, 2000: 7–8, emphasis in original). Historicism defined in this way, he maintains, is present in all modes of thought that seek to account for the common characteristics and specific instances of global capitalism – including the thesis of uneven development: ‘They all share a tendency to think of capital in the image of a unity that arises in one part of the world at a particular period and then develops globally over historical time, encountering and negotiating historical differences in the process’; moreover, ‘even when “capital” is ascribed a “global” as distinct from a European beginning, it is still seen in terms of the Hegelian idea of a totalizing unity – howsoever internally differentiated – that undergoes a process of development in historical time’ (2000: 47).

To displace historicism as he defines it, Chakrabarty deploys the categories of what he

calls History 1 (histories posited by capital) and History 2 (those that do not belong to capital's 'life process') that he distills from Marx's *Theories of Surplus-Value*. Defined in terms of abstract labor, History 1 denotes 'the universal and necessary history we associate with capital . . . [that] forms the backbone of the usual narratives of transition to the capitalist mode of production' and that 'lends itself to the reproduction of capitalist relationships' (2000: 63–64). History 2 'allows us to make room, in Marx's own analytic of capital, for the politics of human belonging and diversity' (2000: 67), understood in terms derived from Heidegger. The pasts encompassed by History 2 are not separate from capital – rather 'they inhere in capital yet interrupt and punctuate the run of capital's own logic' (2000: 64). Thus 'what interrupts and defers capital's self-realization are the various History 2s that always modify History 1 and thus act as our grounds for claiming historical difference' (2000: 71). By the same token, 'No historical form of capital, however global its reach, can ever be universal' because 'any historically available form of capital is a provisional compromise made of History 1 modified by somebody's History 2s' (2000: 70).

As part of a wide-ranging attack on Indian subaltern studies, Chibber dismisses Chakrabarty's claims and critique of historicism, but strongly endorses the distinction between History 1 and 2. Far from disrupting the thrust of History 1, however, History 2 is more often functional to it, if not produced by it:

Since universalization does not require the extinction of History 2, there is no necessary antagonism between the Two Histories. History 1 has no need to extinguish History 2. And since there is no antagonism, History 2 can persist, in all its multifarious glory, alongside History 1 . . . the Two Histories can retain their own dynamic properties even while continuing to intersect now and again. Theories committed to the reality of capital's universalization do not, therefore, have to be blind to historical diversity. They can affirm the former,

while also recognizing the viability of all the relations and practices that Chakrabarty groups under History 2. (Chibber, 2013: 243)

Simply reasserting a universal process of capitalist development, Chibber rides roughshod over Chakrabarty's deconstructive ambitions.

This attack has, of course, ignited a firestorm of debate that continues to rage. Yet from the perspective of an open spatio-historical conception of dialectics, what is striking are the similarities in how both Chakrabarty and Chibber structure their arguments about whether or not capital has universalized – despite differences in their definitions and deployments of History 1 and History 2. Chibber asserts an explicitly encompassing approach, in which 'the West' and the 'non-West' are 'variations of the same basic form' (2013: 23). Yet for Chakrabarty History 1 *also* operates in effect as an encompassing presumption of an overarching process (albeit one that operates at a very high level of abstraction).¹² In relation to this teleological process, History 2s feature as 'local' variations and interruptions – but not as active constituent forces.¹³

More generally, for all their declared Marxist affinities, both Chakrabarty and Chibber subscribe to similarly deracinated readings along several key axes. First, both ignore Marx's method of advancing from the abstract to the concrete through multiple relations and determinations, discussed earlier. This dialectical method, focused on slippages, openings, and contradictions (disruptions if you will), renders deeply problematic the artifice of History 1 and History 2, however defined. Second, neither attends to how Marx moved decisively away from the unilinearity of the *Communist Manifesto*, especially in the period following the Paris Commune but prior to that as well.¹⁴ Third, neither Chakrabarty nor Chibber attends to the large body of appropriations, revisions, and deployments of Marx's thought beyond Euro-America, many of which recognize the

centrality of nationalism. Most immediately is the insistence by many, going back to W.E.B. Du Bois (1962 [1935]) and C.L.R. James (1989 [1938]), on slavery and racism as crucial in the making of global capitalism and the modern world. In his classic text *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (2000 [1983]: 9), Cedric Robinson observed that ‘The historical development of world capitalism was influenced in the most fundamental way by the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism’ with which orthodox Marxist accounts fail to come to grips. His arguments about the black radical tradition in terms of ongoing and profoundly constitutive struggles against racial oppression and exploitation – including but by no means limited to the Haitian Revolution and its global reverberations – underscore the limits of both Chakrabarty’s and Chibber’s versions of History 1 and 2. So too do feminist arguments about the constitutive force of gender and sexuality in relation to other dimensions of difference.

Relatedly, and as an entailment of the inherently encompassing character of both arguments, neither Chakrabarty nor Chibber calls into question the diffusionist presumptions of capitalism as an internally driven force that arises in Europe and radiates out from there. In their fixation on History 1 and 2, neither pays attention to questions of spatiality, let alone to the spatio-historical interconnections and mutual processes of constitution that form the core of Marxist postcolonial geographies – as part of which a revised form of relational comparison can be seen as a relevant method.

VIII Revisiting relational comparison: Marxist postcolonial geographies in practice

In the ‘trinity formula’ [that Marx laid out in Volume 3 of *Capital*] . . . there were three, not two, elements in the capitalist mode of production and

in bourgeois society. These three aspects or ‘factors’ were the earth (Madame la Terre), capital (Monsieur le Capital), and labour (the Workers) . . . And three, I repeat, rather than two: the earlier binary opposition (wages versus capital, bourgeoisie versus working class) had been abandoned. In speaking of the earth, Marx did not simply mean agriculture. Underground resources were also part of the picture. So too was the nation state, confined within a specific territory. And hence ultimately, in the most absolute sense, politics and political strategy. (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]: 324–325)

The inclusion of nature (and of agents associated with it) should displace the capital/labor relation from the ossified centrality it has been made to occupy by Marxist theory . . . In light of this more comprehensive view of capitalism, it would be difficult to reduce its development to a dialectic of capital and labor originating in advanced centers and expanding to the backward periphery . . . *By including the worldwide agents involved in the making of capitalism, this perspective makes it possible to envisage a global, non-Eurocentric conception of its development . . . The critical purpose is to apprehend the relational character of the units involved in the making of the modern world, not to multiply their number as independent entities.* (Coronil, 1997: 61–2, emphasis added)

By elaborating Lefebvre’s insistence on extending the capital/labor relation to include land and nature, Fernando Coronil opened up a major new spatio-historical field of postcolonial analysis – what I am calling Marxist postcolonial geographies – with close affinities to the black radical tradition, the work of Fanon and Cesaire, and a number of other deployments of Marxist analysis beyond Euro-America.¹⁵ In *The Magical State*, Coronil focused on the Venezuelan state’s capture of oil wealth as part of ‘a unifying view of the global formation of states and of capitalism’, and of all national states as historically and geographically specific but interconnected ‘mediators of an order that is simultaneously national and international,

political and territorial' (1997: 65). Elsewhere he underscores how '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' (Coronil, 2000: 357). Moving beyond the capital-labor relation illuminates as well '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' – all of which continue to define the relation between postcolonial and imperial states, and play into what he called Occidentalism.

At the start of this article, I explained that Coronil's work was a powerful influence on the first phase of my research in South Africa (Hart, 2002). Indeed I saw relational comparison in part as an effort to dismantle Occidentalism and the pernicious strategies of comparison it embodies. In conjunction with my earlier work in agrarian studies, Coronil's reworking of Lefebvre enabled me to focus on racialized dispossession as an ongoing process, and was fundamental to how I developed and used the idea of relational comparison in working through connections between forces at play in South Africa and East Asia in terms of divergent histories of land dispossession and redistribution. Since then, as I have grappled with questions of nationalism in post-apartheid South Africa in relation to those in India and other regions of the world, I have had to revise and deepen relational comparison by focusing on Lefebvre's regressive-progressive method in combination with an explicitly conjunctural analysis, as noted at several points in this article. I will now try to spell out more fully and concretely what I mean by this move, and suggest how it might function as a method for practicing Marxist postcolonial geographies.

As outlined earlier, I was propelled in this direction in the first instance by the emergence in South Africa in the early to mid-2000s of intensified expressions of nationalism and amplifying populist politics that accompanied the rise to power of Jacob Zuma. I was concerned as well by how, with some notable exceptions, many on the left refused to take nationalism seriously. In confronting the question of how to theorize these resurgent nationalisms, I was drawn immediately to Fanon and Gramsci. My interest in thinking about the intertwining of intensifying nationalisms and neoliberal forms of capitalism in South Africa in relation to those in India was sparked by Sumit Sarkar's 'Inclusive Democracy and its Enemies' (2006), originally delivered as a lecture in Johannesburg.¹⁶ As I delved more deeply into Indian analyses and debates, I came to see how they were the products of interconnected spatio-historical processes that bore remarkable parallels and convergences – as well as divergences – with those in South Africa. These simultaneously conceptual and empirical provocations gave me new angles of understanding and, as mentioned earlier, several of the major arguments in my book *Rethinking the South African Crisis* (2014), developed in conversation (both explicit and implicit) with these Indian engagements.

In a necessarily schematic way, let me highlight three key points of engagement with Indian debates and processes that pushed me to put Lefebvre's regressive-progressive method to work and simultaneously to think about relational comparison in more explicitly conjunctural terms than I had previously done. First is Manu Goswami's (2002) brilliant reworking of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, in which she contests the claim that what he called 'modular nationalism' diffused from Europe to Asia and Africa. Instead she argues that the era of high imperialism (1870–1914) was simultaneously the period of high Euro-American nationalisms *and* the rise of anti-colonial

national movements. Although fashioned by local social relations and power struggles, their synchronicity and structural similarities ‘were conditioned by their location within a single, increasingly interdependent and hierarchically organized global space-time’ (2002: 788). Together with her Lefebvrian-inspired book *Producing India* (2004), Goswami’s work provided me with a spatio-historical and conjunctural framework for thinking about India and South Africa not as pre-given units, but as key outposts and supports of the British empire in the era of high imperialism, thrown into contentious existence as nation-states in the 20th century through processes that continue to reverberate in the present. More generally, this analysis is crucial to dismantling ‘methodological nationalism’ – namely, ‘the reification of the nation-state as the self-evident container of political, cultural, and economic relations’ (Goswami, 2002: 794).¹⁷

A second key point of engagement is with a rich trove of analysis – ethnographic as well as spatio-historical – that makes vividly clear the heavily gendered practices and processes through which extreme right-wing anti-Muslim Hindu nationalism burst violently on to the scene in the early 1990s, coinciding with liberalization of the Indian economy and with greater official recognition accorded to some lower-caste groups. This coincidence was, of course, precisely the global conjunctural moment that also marked the end of apartheid. As I started thinking through Indian processes in relation to their counterparts in South Africa in early 1990s, I was constantly thrust further back into the past. This in turn enabled a growing recognition of extraordinary and illuminating convergences and divergences between forces at play in India and South Africa at key conjunctural moments over the 20th century. My argument about the need to rethink the transition from apartheid in the early 1990s in terms of simultaneous processes of de-nationalization and re-nationalization (Hart, 2014) was shaped in important ways by reflecting on spatio-

historical dynamics in South Africa through an Indian lens.

Both these points of engagement entail working back to the past. My third point of engagement with Indian debates turns around the question of how best to travel back to the present in order to open out to the future – and, along with many others, the vehicle that I’ve found most road-worthy is the concept of passive revolution. Gramsci developed passive revolution as a dynamic, conjunctural, and inherently comparative concept to produce new understandings of European history capable of explaining the rise of fascism. Accordingly, it requires significant reworking, most immediately through attention to anti- and post-colonial nationalisms.¹⁸ In *Rethinking the South African Crisis* (2014), my efforts to repurpose passive revolution drew directly on Ato Sekyi-Otu’s (1996) reading of Fanon, and of Gramsci as ‘a precocious Fanonian’. Implicitly, though, these arguments were also profoundly shaped by critical engagement with Partha Chatterjee’s deployments of passive revolution and anti/postcolonial nationalisms, as well as his debates with other Indian scholars, that I have since made more explicit (Hart, 2015). In a forthcoming essay I will focus on the stakes of multiple, radically incommensurate concepts of ‘subalternity’ currently in play for coming to grips with resurgent racisms, populisms, and nationalisms in different regions of the world.

Let me turn now to reflect briefly on the potential contribution of an explicitly conjunctural understanding of relational comparative analysis to Marxist postcolonial geographies more broadly. Koivisto and Lahtinen (2012) trace the lineage of the concept of conjuncture from Marx and Engels, noting that ‘Marx does indeed speak of the “conjuncture” of circumstances or of “unfavourable conjunctures” . . . but he usually employs instead “relations”, “articulation [*Gliederung*]”, “situation”’ (2012: 268). Underscoring the inherently political character of the concept of conjuncture,

Koivisto and Lahtinen provide a useful mapping of how Lenin, Gramsci, Brecht, Althusser, Poulantzas and Stuart Hall have reworked and used the concept. What they all share is an understanding of conjuncture as an analytical tool that ‘can expand the capacity to act politically by helping to examine the conditions of a political intervention in their complexity . . . and thus open up possibilities for political action’ (Koivisto and Lahtinen, 2012: 267). My own understanding draws most fully on Gramsci (1971: 175–85; Q13§17), for whom conjunctural analysis incorporated what he called ‘relations of force at various levels’ – an analysis that is also profoundly spatial: ‘international relations intertwine with these internal relations of nation-states, creating new, unique and historically concrete combinations’, and ‘this relation between international forces and national forces is further complicated by the existence within every State of several structurally diverse territorial sectors, with diverse relations of force at all levels’ (1971: 182). This formulation makes clear the anti-teleological and anti-reductionist character of a conjunctural framework.

From the perspective of Marxist postcolonial spatio-historical analysis, what is also required is specific attention to what Coronil called the mutual constitution of Europe and its colonies, and their reverberations in the present. Exemplifying precisely this sort of conjunctural analysis is Goswami’s reconstruction of Benedict Anderson’s concept of modular nationalism outlined above. Drawing on insights from the black radical tradition, one can also envisage revisiting and reconstructing Anderson’s arguments about what he called Creole nationalisms in the Americas in the late 18th and early 19th centuries as part of a global conjuncture profoundly shaped by the Haitian Revolution – including redrawing the borders of the United States, and the forces driving Latin American independence movements – that speak directly to contemporary debates.

IX Coda: Dancing dialectically – and comparatively

In drawing to a close, I will try to shine the spotlight on some of the broader methodological strands of argument in this article by bringing questions of comparison into conversation with Ollman’s (2003: 157) lucid summary of what it means to dance dialectically to the music of the philosophy of internal relations. He lays out this dialectical method in terms of six successive, but internally related, moments:

- a) the ontological moment (the world understood in terms of an infinite number of mutually dependent, constantly changing processes that ‘coalesce to form a loosely structured whole or totality’);
- b) the epistemological moment (I see this as a first approximation that starts with what is immediately given in the world, and entails abstracting out the key patterns, relations, and processes on which to focus);
- c) the moment of inquiry that Ollman calls ‘studying history backwards’. This moment can most usefully be understood in terms of Lefebvre’s ‘regressive/progressive’ spatio-historical method outlined earlier;
- d) the moment of ‘intellectual reconstruction or self-clarification, where one puts together the results of such research for oneself’ – while also recognizing oneself as part of the changing processes one is studying;
- e) the moment of exposition, in which one tries to present this dialectical understanding to a particular audience, taking account of how they think and what they know;
- f) the moment of praxis, in which ‘based on whatever clarification has been reached, one consciously acts in the world,

changing it and testing it and deepening one's understanding of it at the same time'.

Ollman warns against the tendency to single out any one moment at the expense of others: 'Only in their internal relations do these six moments constitute a workable and immensely valuable dialectical method' (2003: 158). Moreover, these moments are never traversed once and for all – but must be constantly revisited as one's understanding deepens.

The theme of revisiting has of course threaded its way throughout this article. Although I have resisted defining it as a manifesto, I would like to conclude by offering what an anonymous reviewer usefully suggested as 'provisional lessons of an ongoing process of "revisiting"'. I'll do so by expanding on Ollman's outline of the six moments of dialectical method from the perspective of the questions of comparison engaged in this article.

The ontological moment of a dialectical method framed in terms of the philosophy of internal relations (in which a world of externally related independent 'things' is replaced by processes and relations) is of course intimately linked with epistemological questions – crucial among which are questions of comparison. Most immediately and obviously, this method is sharply at odds with any notion of pre-given, bounded units of analysis with clearly defined properties that underpin all positivist forms of comparison.

Especially in relation to questions of 'totality', different modalities of comparison are also useful in distinguishing the moment of the ontological (taking as given the world as a loosely-structured totality or whole) from that of the epistemological (how we organize our understanding of it). We have seen how, in McMichael's (1990) incorporated comparison, 'totality' operates as a conceptual *procedure*, 'discovered through analysis of the mutual conditioning of the parts' (1990: 391); in effect, he

and Ollman draw a similar distinction between the ontological and epistemological moments. From this perspective, which I share, the chief problem with strategies of encompassing comparison is that they move directly to epistemological presumptions or claims about a predefined 'whole' (or encompassing process) in which the 'parts' are treated as reflections or variations, but not actively constitutive forces.

In revisiting the idea of relational comparison in conversation with Ollman and McMichael, among others, part of my purpose in this article has been to highlight how critical understandings of the production of space (or space-time) speak directly to the methodological entailments of an open, non-teleological conception of dialectics. In a necessarily skeletal way, let me conclude by highlighting five key points.

First, what I am calling Marxist postcolonial geographies are grounded in conceptions of different regions of the world as always already interconnected, both as an ontological position and as an epistemological procedure. More concretely, what the latter move means is starting with what seem to be important *processes* and *practices* rather than with any sort of bounded unit – be it nation, city, village, or whatever – and engaging in an initial round of abstraction or theorizing. What are typically seen as bounded 'units of analysis' are often more usefully understood as vantage points from which to try to begin to grasp the coming together and interconnections of what (at least initially) appear as key processes.

Second, as I suggested above, what Ollman calls the moment of inquiry is not just a matter of 'studying history backwards' but of taking seriously Lefebvre's regressive-progressive method that is simultaneously spatial, historical, and closely attentive to processes and praxis in the multiple arenas of everyday life. In other words, *both* critical ethnography *and* spatio-historical analysis of conjunctures and interconnections are crucial to this dialectical method.

Third, Ollman's 'moment of intellectual reconstruction' can also be seen as the putting into practice of Marx's method of rising from the abstract to the concrete, in the sense of concrete concepts that are the product of multiple relations and determinations, and adequate to the concrete in history. What is so important about situating critical ethnography within an explicitly spatio-historical analysis is that it enables more general understandings of how the specific 'parts' on which one has been focusing feed into and shape broader processes, rather than just reflecting or implementing them (Hart, 2006). As Lefebvre (1991 [1974]: 88) put it, the hyper-complexity of social space 'means that each fragment of space subject to analysis masks not just one social relationship but a host of them that analysis can potentially disclose'. Analyzing different fragments in relation to one another through their specificities as well as their interconnections provides powerful additional leverage – especially when linked to a broader conjunctural analysis.

Fourth, in his discussion of the moment of exposition, Ollman can be read as presupposing an individual academic researcher confronted by an audience unaccustomed to dialectical analysis of this sort, and in need of translation. As someone who has frequently found herself in this position, I am sympathetic to these challenges – and even more so to the position of younger scholars navigating an academic world dominated by positivist epistemology on the one hand, and crudely stereotypical understandings of Marxism on the other.

Yet finally – and here is where the moment of praxis becomes crucial – the political significance of this sort of spatio-historical dialectical method extends far beyond the academy, especially as part of a collective process linked to political organizing envisaged in remarkably similar ways by Fanon and Gramsci. As Andrew Nash put it eloquently, 'Dialectical thought . . . seeks out the hidden cracks in prevailing ideas and conjunctures, anticipates the

unexpected, imagines a future vastly different from the present, and examines the potentialities of the present to seek a basis for its realisation' (2009: 210). In this era of resurgent right-wing populisms and nationalisms, this imperative could not be greater.

Acknowledgements

This paper grows out of conversations with Phil McMichael and others at a workshop on 'The Comparative Imperative' organized by Neil Brenner and Manu Goswami in 2011. In the process of writing and revising, I have incurred further debts of gratitude to many friends and colleagues. They include the wonderful intergenerational reading group that helped me formulate the arguments and read multiple drafts – Phil Campanile, Jean Lave, Zach Levenson, Jacob Liming, and Bridget Martin. I am grateful as well for an illuminating conversation with Cindi Katz just before the AAG. In the process of revision Jennifer Casolo, Sharad Chari, Mark Hunter, Bridget Kenny, Stefan Kipfer, Alex Loftus, and Melanie Samson also provided tremendous help. Pauline McGuirk shepherded me through the process and gave deeply insightful comments, as did two reviewers. David Szanton has been on the front lines throughout.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. See for example *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses* (2013), edited by Rita Felski and Susan Friedman, which includes Shu-Mei Shih's fascinating essay on 'Comparison as Relation' that draws together what she calls integrative world history with Édouard Glissant's (1997) *Poetics of Relation* to develop a critical method of relational comparison that argues for 'doing comparative literature as relational studies' (Shih, 2013: 79). Despite obvious disciplinary differences

- in how each of us thinks about relational comparison, there are some close resonances.
2. See Lave (2011) for an illuminating exposition of critical ethnography as comprising, among other things, a form of apprenticeship in one's own changing practice.
 3. Through some residual memory of having read the article in the early 1990s I may well have taken these ideas from him – I have apologized to Phil McMichael for this; he has, I hope, forgiven me, and we plan to write an essay together.
 4. For a useful outline of Lefebvre's regressive-progressive method see Stanek (2011: 159–61).
 5. It is important to note here that few Marxists think explicitly in terms of internal relations. Ollman (2003) identifies Lukács, Lefebvre and Karel Kosik, on whose text *Dialectics of the Concrete* (1976) McMichael draws; and one can add (among others) Coronil (1997), who is quite explicit about how he draws on Ollman's exposition of an open dialectics.
 6. One could add to this eight-point summary a relational conception of the person that is very different from the liberal sovereign subject and from anti-humanist conceptions (both structuralist and poststructuralist) but is consistent with non-Western conceptions in many regions of the world.
 7. I discuss distinctively different concepts of articulation and their political stakes in Hart (2007). See also Chari (2015) for further reflections on Hall's contribution.
 8. An illuminating instance of this tendency is on display in Isaac Julien's film *Kapital* (2013), that centers on a conversation between Harvey and Julien. At one point Stuart Hall intervenes from the audience with a commentary on the reductionist character of Harvey's analysis – to which Harvey swiftly replies that he doesn't need race and gender to explain the financial crisis. One can read this exchange as exemplifying dramatically different interpretations of Marxist method: Harvey's insistence on moving directly to assert a general process in necessarily reductionist terms, and Hall's refusal of reductionism that is evident both in his reading of Marx's method (2003 [1974]) and in his path-breaking work on the dialectical articulations of class and race (1980).
 9. This difficulty is evident, for example, in Peck's (2015: 172) approving citation of a claim by Scott and Storper (2015: 11) that 'meaningful comparative work requires that we have a clear theoretical sense of the significance and properties of the units of analysis before comparison is initiated' – a precise statement of what McMichael (1990) calls 'analytical comparison'.
 10. In their incisive analysis of planetary urbanization, Buckley and Strauss (2016: 15) warn that 'we must take great care that the theoretical and epistemological underpinnings of Lefebvre's hypothesis of planetary urbanization do not become enrolled into the very kind of intellectual imperialism that he himself argued so vociferously against'; and they focus as well on 'silences in current planetary urbanization debates on the long engagement that feminist and other radical scholarship has had with dismantling the structured contours of "the urban" as a category of theory'. See also Kipfer and Goonewardena's argument that 'Lefebvre's notion of "colonization" (which refers to multi-scalar strategies for organizing territorial relations of domination) presents a promising opening to understanding the "colonial" aspects of urbanisation today' (2013: 76). Deploying a very different reading of Lefebvre's *Urban Revolution* (2003) than proponents of planetary urbanization, they focus on how the urban level (level M) mediates 'colonial' state strategies – which operate at the level of the social order as a whole (level G) – in their always *contingent* capacities to organize everyday life (level P) (2013: 96). Yet they argue as well that the limits of Lefebvre's own work lie in his inadequate specification of historically *specific* forms of colonization and their *particular* forms of determination.
 11. In this section I am using the term 'subaltern studies debates' to refer narrowly to Chibber's attack on Chakrabarty (2000), as well as other debates provoked by *Provincializing Europe*.
 12. Thanks to Zach Levenson for discussion on this point.
 13. Recent critiques of *Provincializing Europe* include Kaiwar (2014) and Harootunian (2015). In his generally sympathetic assessment, Vinay Gidwani (2008) brings Chakrabarty into conversation with Harvey's *Limits to Capital* (1982), pointing both to the reductionism of *Limits* – and to how, in the afterword, Harvey in effect 'gives credence to Chakrabarty's critique by gesturing to the unassimilable aspect of labor' (Gidwani, 2008: 225). Yet Gidwani also delivers a trenchant critique of Chakrabarty, noting that, for all his (Gidwani's) differences with Harvey, 'There is a layered spatiality in his [Harvey's]

imagination of capital that is, oddly enough, missing in Chakrabarty . . . [whose] understanding of capital remains quite flat and schematic' (Gidwani, 2008: 227–8).

14. See, for example, Shanin (1983), Anderson (2010) and Ross (2015).
15. I discuss these more fully in a forthcoming essay provisionally entitled 'What is the Concept of Subalternity Good For?'
16. The volume on South Africa and India edited by Hofmeyer and Williams (2011) was useful as well.
17. For a different through related analysis, see Sparke (2005).
18. See Kipfer and Hart (2013) for a fuller discussion of translating Gramsci's work in other times and places.

References

- Anderson B (2006 [1983]) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Anderson KB (2010) *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bhaskar R (1993) *Dialectics*. London: Verso.
- Blaut JM (1993) *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Brenner N and Schmid C (2014) The 'urban age' in question. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38(3): 731–55.
- Brenner N and Schmid C (2015) Towards a new epistemology of the urban? *City* 19(2–3): 151–182.
- Buckley M and Strauss K (2016) With, against, and beyond Lefebvre: Planetary urbanism and epistemic plurality. *Environment and Planning D*. DOI: 10.1177/0263775816628872.
- Chakrabarty D (2000) *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Chari S (2015) Three moments of Stuart Hall in South Africa. *Critical Sociology*, early online publication 0896920515620475.
- Chibber V (2013) *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*. London: Verso.
- Coronil F (1996) Beyond Occidentalism: Toward non-imperial geohistorical categories. *Cultural Anthropology* 11(1): 51–87.
- Coronil F (1997) *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Coronil F (2000) Towards a critique of global-centrism: Speculations on capitalism's nature. *Public Culture* 12: 351–374.
- DeLanda M (2006) *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Derickson KD (2015) Urban geography I: Locating urban theory in the 'urban age'. *Progress in Human Geography* 39(5): 647–657.
- Du Bois WEB (1962 [1935]) *Black Reconstruction in America*. New York: Russell & Russell.
- Elden S (2004) *Understanding Henri Lefebvre*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Felski R and Friedman SS (eds) (2013) *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Gidwani V (2008) *Capital, Interrupted: Agrarian Development and the Politics of Work in India*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gilmore RW (2007) *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Glissant E (1997) *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Goswami M (2002) Rethinking the modular nation form: Toward a sociohistorical conception of nationalism. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44(4): 770–799.
- Goswami M (2004) *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hall S (1980) Race, articulation, and societies structured in dominance. In: *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*. Paris: UNESCO, 305–345.
- Hall S (1985) Signification, representation, ideology: Althusser and the post-structuralist debates. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2(2): 91–114.
- Hall S (1986) The problem of ideology: Marxism without guarantees. *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10(2): 28–44.
- Hall S (2003) Marx's notes on method: A 'reading' of the '1857 Introduction'. *Cultural Studies* 17(2): 113–149.
- Harootyan H (2005) Some thoughts on comparability and the space-time problem. *Boundary 2* 32(2): 23–52.

- Harootyan H (2015) *Marx After Marx: History and Time in the Expansion of Capitalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hart G (2002) *Disabling Globalization: Places of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Hart G (2006) Denaturalizing dispossession: Critical ethnography in the age of resurgent imperialism. *Antipode* 38(5): 977–1004.
- Hart G (2007) Changing concepts of articulation: Political stakes in South Africa today. *Review of African Political Economy* 34(111): 85–101.
- Hart G (2014) *Rethinking the South African Crisis: Nationalism, Populism, Hegemony*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Hart G (2015) Political society and its discontents: Translating passive revolution in India and South Africa today. *Economic and Political Weekly* 50(43): 43–51.
- Harvey D (1996) *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Hofmeyer I and Williams M (eds) (2011) *South Africa and India: Shaping the Global South*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- James CLR (1989 [1938]) *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution (2nd ed., rev.)*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Kaiwar V (2015) *The Postcolonial Orient: The Politics of Difference and the Project of Provincializing Europe*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.
- Katz C (2008) Messing with 'the project'. In: Harvey D, *A Critical Reader*, ed. Castree N and Gregory D. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 234–246.
- Kipfer S and Goonewardena K (2013) Urban Marxism and the post-colonial question: Henri Lefebvre and 'colonisation'. *Historical Materialism* 21(2): 76–116.
- Kipfer S and Hart G (2013) Translating Gramsci in the current conjuncture. In: Ekers M, Hart G, Kipfer S and Loftus A (eds) *Gramsci: Space, Nature, Politics*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 323–343.
- Koivisto J and Lahtinen M (2012) Historical-critical dictionary of Marxism: 'Conjuncture'. *Historical Materialism* 20(1): 267–277.
- Kosik K (1976) *Dialectics of the Concrete*. Boston, MA: D. Reidel.
- Lave J (2011) *Apprenticeship in Critical Ethnographic Practice*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lefebvre H (1991 [1974]) *The Production of Space*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Lefebvre H (2003) *The Urban Revolution*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Leitner H and Sheppard E (2016) Provincializing critical urban theory: Extending the ecosystem of possibilities. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40(1): 228–235.
- Lowe L (2005) Insufficient difference. *Ethnicities* 5(3): 409–414.
- Massey D (1994) *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- McMichael P (1990) Incorporating comparison within a world-historical perspective: An alternative comparative method. *American Historical Review* 55(3): 385–397.
- Merrifield A (2012) The urban question under planetary urbanization. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37: 909–922.
- Merrifield A (2013) *The Politics of the Encounter: Urban Theory and Protest under Planetary Urbanization*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Nash A (2009) *The Dialectical Tradition on South Africa*. London: Routledge.
- Ollman B (1971) *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ollman B (2003) *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Peck J (2015) Cities beyond compare? *Regional Studies* 49(1): 160–182.
- Robinson C (2000 [1983]) *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Robinson J (2016a) Thinking cities through elsewhere: Comparative tactics for a more global urban studies. *Progress in Human Geography* 40(1): 3–29.
- Robinson J (2016b) Comparative urbanism: New geographies and cultures of theorizing the urban. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40(1): 187–199.
- Ross K (2015) *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*. London: Verso.
- Roy A (2015) What is urban about critical urban theory? *Urban Geography* 37(6): 810–823.
- Roy A (2016) Who's afraid of postcolonial theory? *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40(1): 200–209.
- Sarkar S (2006) Inclusive democracy and its enemies. *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 7(3): 304–309.

- Sayer D (1987) *The Violence of Abstraction: The Analytic Foundations of Historical Materialism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Sayre N (2008) Assessing the effects of the *Grundrisse* in Anglophone geography and anthropology. *Antipode* 40(5): 898–920.
- Scott AJ and Storper M (2015) The nature of cities: The scope and limits of urban theory. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 39(1): 1–16.
- Sekyi-Otu A (1996) *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Shanin T (1983) *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the Peripheries of Capitalism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Sheppard E (2008a) David Harvey and dialectical space-time. In: Harvey D, *A Critical Reader*, ed. Castree N and Gregory D. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 121–141.
- Sheppard E (2008b) Geographic dialectics? *Environment and Planning A* 40: 2603–2612.
- Shih S-M (2013) Comparison as relation. In: Felski R and Friedman SS (eds) *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 80–98.
- Sparke M (2005) *In the Space of Theory: Postfoundational Geographies of the Nation-State*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Stanek Ł (2011) *Henri Lefebvre on Space: Architecture, Urban Research, and the Production of Theory*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Tilly C (1984) *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Wallerstein E (1983) *The Capitalist World Economy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wright M (2008) Differences that matter. In: Harvey D, *A Critical Reader*, ed. Castree N and Gregory D. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 80–101.

Author biography

Gillian Hart is a Distinguished Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg and a Professor of the Graduate School, University of California, Berkeley.