According to Marx’s thought, the task of theory is to reveal the objective conditions of social and political action. The key to the Marxian understanding of social life consists in reverting the images of the material world that have been distorted by ideology as in a camera obscura: the entire rationale for theory, then, is to elucidate the particular development of ideas, attitudes, moral and social rules, and, of course, the structure of power and authority that are inimical to subjective consciousness.

The central concern of David Harvey’s book is precisely to unravel the tensions and discrepancies that are concealed under the cover of illusory knowledge. Faithful to the Marxian tradition, Harvey’s basic idea is to disclose the dissimulated networks of fictions designed to forge and sustain the myth of a unified political community whose institutions, habits and beliefs have come to be regarded as universally valid. The geographer’s central line of attack, then, is the identification of the internal contradictions of the existing mode of production which, if unmasked and demystified, would enable us to shape a coherent set of anti-capitalist responses.

To Harvey, theory has a highly practical orientation: the abstract necessity of building a “model of how the economic engine of capitalism works” (8) is expressed in the intuition that the theorist can conclusively remove the neoliberal smokescreen that covers up reality. Indeed, Harvey argues that mistaken representations abound in our current interpretations of the existing mode of production. As a result, a “neoliberal consensus” imposed by a global elite has opened up most social arenas to private capital accumulation and circulation, while befogging the fact that its political articulations define “both the spaces and the forms of its own primary forms of opposition” (281). Therefore, it is through a critical exposition of “the ruling ideology,” its treatment of politics as if it were a market and its promotion of an economic theory of democracy that the geographer strives to put forward cogent possibilities of human emancipation in order to bring about social change. Moreover, Harvey asserts that unlike the “largely incomprehensible post-structuralism that favours identity politics” (xiii), class analysis is better able to provide the foundation for a “collective political subjectivity” that might converge and coalesce into a “unified solidarious movement” (267).

It goes without saying, however, that many of the aspects covered by Harvey’s study are not esoteric topics crying out for vulgarization; he undertakes to describe, for instance, the distinction between use value and exchange value, the division of labour, and compound growth, to name but a few. Nevertheless, Harvey offers an interesting discussion on liberty as well as an acerbic critique of “non-contradictory” versions of capitalism, for which he is greatly indebted to Karl Polanyi. The main argument draws
from the Marxian contention that the “true realm of individual freedom” is hardly attainable in practice, for “most of us socialized into the ways of capital” cannot but uphold “some partial, debased and in the end imprisoning concepts of liberty and freedom” (200). In other words, by way of a reflection on the immanent possibilities of freedom and social harmony within the existing order, we find ourselves compelled to acknowledge the inner connection between authority and the spurious conception of freedom that rests on the “needs and demands” of capital (208).

Harvey objects, for example, to Amartya Sen’s depiction of “capitalism with a human face,” that is, the mingling of economic imperatives with alleged humanism “in the name of freedom” (208). For although Sen is well aware that oppositions and tensions are an immanent aspect of capitalism, he truly believes that all of them are manageable after all (210). Against Sen’s “liberal humanism,” Harvey argues that the very meaning of freedom can only be fully grasped in light of a dialectical relation, because “it is impossible to escape the contradictory unity of freedom and domination”—as long as we don’t discard the “utopian vision of classical political economy,” “libertarian politics” and “the neoliberal ethic” (206). Thus, Harvey contends that “bourgeois economy’s” elite is striving to conceal those contradictions that remain the Achilles heel of capitalism, hence the means of empowerment given by shedding light on them.

In sum, a general weakness of the book is the drastically over-simple formulation of the solution: “overthrow individualistic bourgeois conceptions of wealth and of value in order to release the potential for creative but collective human flourishing” (214). From Harvey’s point of view, social strife that is not reducible to class antagonisms and whose ultimate aim is not to subvert capitalism is seen as futile or even cumbersome. This is the result of a somewhat mechanical understanding of agency for which the notion of identity is nothing more than metaphysical hogwash. This is not to say that priority has to be accorded to political demands under the banner of a “politics of identity” nor of feminist or environmental preoccupations, rather, that there are autonomous and sectoral struggles which are legitimate and cannot be reduced to an anti-capitalist politics. But this should not make the reader hesitant to consider the arguments presented in this book. David Harvey’s analysis continually calls attention to the importance of conceiving radical alternatives to the structural facets of economic domination.

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Forthcoming in *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science Politique*