

Thinking conjuncturally, looking elsewhere

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Abstract

Inspired by Jamie Peck's recent article on conjunctural methodologies, we discuss how geographers might interpret these troubling times. We hope to keep the conversation going by suggesting that a strength of conjunctural analysis lies in trying to get to grips with multiple crises without always knowing precisely where to look. Another strength of this approach is to take seriously all the cultural and political work involved in the articulation of different struggles, tensions, and contradictions combining in complex, and sometimes surprising, ways. So, in addition to looking inward to economic geography, we suggest that thinking conjuncturally might also involve looking elsewhere to ask what's at stake in the present moment – in all its complexity – in order to bring other political possibilities into view.

Keywords

conjunctural analysis, multiplicity, openness, political alternatives, spatial politics

Conjunctural thinking is back on the agenda in human geography. Over recent years, many geographers – including Jamie Peck (2017, 2023) – have turned to conjunctural analysis to think spatially about the politics of the present (e.g., Cumbers and Paul, 2022; Dixon et al., 2023, Hart, 2023, Leitner et al., 2020; Nolan and Featherstone, 2015; Peck, 2023; Sultana, 2021). From climate breakdown and economic instability to social unrest and culture wars, all kinds of crises are reshaping the political terrain as we know it. Avoiding the simplifying tendencies often bound up with crisis talk, the promise of conjunctural analysis lies in trying to get to grips with the many

different forces, pressures, antagonisms, and contradictions combining in complex, and sometimes surprising, ways (Clarke, 2010, 2023). It is welcome, therefore, that Peck (2023) seeks to generate a 'methodological remit' for how such ideas – drawn from beyond the discipline of geography – might enliven the kinds of geographical inquiry needed for these unsettling times.

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In this commentary, we offer a response to Peck's (2023) article that is intended in the comradely spirit of keeping the conversation going. After all, as John Clarke (2023) insists, thinking conjuncturally is nothing if not a collective endeavour. Our aim here is not to dispute or disavow points made by Peck. Rather, it is to suggest that if geographers are to come to terms with what's at stake in the present moment, there is a need to open up conjunctural thinking to take seriously all the cultural and political work involved in the articulation of different crises – material, ideological, discursive – wherever that may lead.

Taking inspiration from Gramsci and, later, Stuart Hall and others within cultural studies, conjunctural thinking is driven by the need to get to grips with the complexity and multiplicity of the political present in order to actively engage with it. Henry Yeung (2023) has observed that the 'conjunctural' is becoming something of a buzzword or fad within critical human geography, at a time when talk of 'global polycrisis' and 'permacrisis' seems to be everywhere. We are less worried about the rush to bring conjunctural analysis into the geographical vocabulary and rather more concerned about the need to think carefully about the whereabouts of crisis. If conjunctural analysis once privileged a national frame for interpreting moments of political rupture, then recent calls to interpret the current 'global conjuncture' present a hugely demanding – perhaps, too demanding – task.

Like Peck and his interlocutors, we feel conjunctural analysis has much to offer geographers and others trying to make sense of these turbulent times – and for all those trying to work out how this turbulence might be turned to political advantage. Yet it takes an awful lot of work to come to terms with the many times and spaces conditioning the present conjuncture; no single vantage point will ever be quite sufficient for knowing exactly what's going on. So rather than simply refining subdisciplinary debates – at risk of performing a 'playful intellectual pirouette', as Cheng and Gonzalez-Vicente (2023) caution – we suggest conjunctural thinking should also encourage us to *look elsewhere*. Quite what we mean by looking elsewhere warrants elaboration.

One of the strengths – and challenges – of conjunctural thinking lies in trying to get to grips with multiple crises without already knowing precisely where to look: following the connections and relations 'wherever they happen to lead', as Peck (2023) puts it. Taking inspiration from cultural studies, conjunctural analysis rejects epochal thinking through 'doing the dirty work' of grounded historical analysis to unravel how the present is woven through multiple, overlapping temporalities.¹ Not only must we focus on 'dominant' tendencies within a particular social formation but also pay attention to the 'residual' and 'emergent', and their dynamic interrelations and entanglements (Clarke, 2010; Williams, 1977). If we only focus on the dominant, we risk ignoring what else might also be going on at the same moment. As Hall (1979) emphasises, we cannot determine in advance which struggles and contending forces at work in a particular historical conjuncture might come to be significant. In this way alone, thinking the conjuncture is no easy task.

But the question of where to look also confronts us with a profoundly geographical challenge: what are the spaces of the present conjuncture? As a relational and unbounded mode of inquiry, Peck (2023) joins others seeking to dislodge any residual methodological nationalism within conjunctural analysis (cf. Clarke, 2018, 2023; Leitner and Sheppard, 2020). Alongside Helga Leitner and Eric Sheppard, Peck has been advocating conjunctural approaches within urban studies, exploring how this might help generate new methodological insights for inter-urban comparison (Leitner et al., 2020; Leitner and Sheppard, 2020; Peck, 2017). To be sure, this is an exciting proposition. Certainly, it resonates with some of our own interests in policy mobilities and new forms of urban governance (e.g., Thompson and Lorne, 2023). Yet, there may be a risk of losing the political impulse driving conjunctural analysis in the process of undertaking such methodological manoeuvres.

It is significant, then, that Peck (2023) interrogates the 'problematic' – invoking Althusser – of Chinese capitalism and, with others elsewhere, of the 'new state capitalism' (Dixon et al., 2023) to

explore how conjunctural approaches may contribute. In turning to the case of China's Great Bay Area, Peck helpfully prises open some of those possibilities, highlighting tensions whilst identifying the uneasy ways in which different elements come together to define an emergent space, interrogating the notion of Party State Capitalism. One challenge, then, would be to take the analysis further as an active political process.

It is therefore worth bringing Peck's (2023) article into dialogue with conjunctural thinking beyond the discipline of geography, with, for instance, John Clarke's (2023) recent efforts to think transnationally about the puzzle of an increasingly unsettled Britain, whereby the spatial imaginaries of 'Empire', 'Europe', and 'America' figure differently in the unmaking and remaking of a British 'nation' and its present troubles. Despite drawing upon similar analytical points of reference – including Clarke's contribution to *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al., 1978) – conjunctural thinking can be taken in rather different directions depending on the questions posed and the particular spatial configurations under examination.

It should come as no surprise that Doreen Massey registers so strongly in both Peck's and Clarke's work in thinking through the spaces of the present conjuncture. Alongside Gillian Hart, Massey has been an unquestionable force in thinking conjunctures spatially – 'relational by definition' (Peck, 2023). There are two points worth mentioning briefly here: first, Massey's approach to geography requires us to pay attention to the many different instances of a social formation – the economic, the political, the cultural, and so forth – that come into view when thinking conjuncturally. Second, her conceptualization of space and power evolved over the decades. Without ever losing sight of structuring forces and contradictory dynamics, her growing emphasis on openness, multiplicity, and contingency is worth holding onto.

When things get turbulent, it can be all-too-easy to simply 'do the economy' (Hall and Massey, 2010). Recall what Gramsci (1971: 177) understood as the 'conjunctural' in terms of the 'occasional, immediate, almost accidental', shaped by the specificities of time and place and amenable to change

through political and cultural intervention – as opposed to structural, 'organic' crisis. Recent appeals to conjunctural analysis speak to the need to investigate which multiplicities matter and how this helps reveal strategic openings for unsettling the dominant social settlement (as discussed by Massey in Peck et al., 2014). Might we instead think about how 'the economy' – as one of the cross-cutting forces and crisis-laden dynamics – offers one way into situating and interpreting the political conjuncture in all its complexity?

An overarching concern for Peck (2023), quite understandably, is to establish methodological rigour in the orientation of conjunctural thinking which, as he reflects, cannot be reduced to a set of methodological formulae or standardised routines replicated from one place to another. We suggest that there is value in the commitment to contextuality and complexity within cultural studies whereby thinking conjuncturally is understood as being 'provisional, uncertain, open-ended and happily incomplete' (Grossberg, 2017: 108). So, despite a 'necessary detour' through theory, as Hall (1992: 283) famously put it, *not quite knowing in advance where to look* helps keep conjunctural analysis alive to political urgency and opportunity. This may make it 'elusive', as Peck suggests, because it requires an unfamiliar kind of rigour which demands thinking the conjuncture in all its complexity without anything becoming too familiar or predictable. Peck makes precisely this point and we hope it doesn't get lost in the 'spiraling' processes of the 'thick theorising' of complexity 'all the way up', 'all the way down', and 'all the way out'.

There is clear affinity between Massey's (2005) emphasis on the openness of space and thinking through openness – conceptually, methodologically, politically – within cultural studies-inflected modes of conjunctural analysis (Clarke, 2023; Hall, 1986; Hall et al., 1978; Henriques et al., 2017). And, if we follow Massey's (2005) conceptualization of space as a multiplicity of stories-so-far, to think through the 'chance of space', all the connections yet-to-be-made – including the 'loose ends and missing links' (Massey, 2005: 12) – then we should aim to ensure that conjunctural analysis does not become overly engineered, prescriptive,

or inward-facing. ‘There are’, Massey (2005: 163) insisted, ‘no rules of space and place’.

Certainly, the idea of *articulation* speaks – in one sense, quite literally – to how all kinds of different antagonisms, contradictions, and tensions get condensed into contradictory unity: just how are people making sense of the troubles of the present? And whereabouts is power in all this? As Angela McRobbie (2017: 57) outlines, in the articulation of political cultures, ‘hegemonic power [is] sought by stitching together diverse interest groups to create a field of consent’. If politics and space are to be open and contestable, there is always the possibility that such configurations may be rearticulated in other ways. Amidst a shifting balance of forces, all kinds of political paths might become imaginable. This is why a focus on the *residual* and *emergent* – as well as the dominant – really matters (Clarke, 2023). And it is precisely why we emphasise the openness of thinking conjuncturally, which demands asking what’s at stake in the present moment – a moment forged through different relations and connections – and how alternative associations and new solidarities across interconnected struggles might bring other political possibilities into view.

Conjunctural analysis struggles with the political present. While we may not be entirely certain where things are heading, the possibility of change remains fundamental. Hegemonies are not totalities, Massey insisted (as discussed in Peck et al., 2014); in that context, the challenge must surely remain to contribute towards unsettling the dominant social settlement and its many injustices. Such an orientation towards political change always starts from somewhere whilst being bound up with places elsewhere. At its most powerful, thinking conjuncturally should pose politically strategic questions about the different struggles, antagonisms, and forces fusing together in a particular social formation – and ask what critical geographers might push for in these troubling times.


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Note

1. ‘Doing the dirty work’ is a reference to John Clarke’s presentation at the Stuart Hall symposium held at Goldsmiths in 2014, later published in 2017 (Henriques et al., 2017). It hints towards the challenges of the work (often hidden, ignored, or unfinished) to get to grips with the complex present and why this must necessarily be a collective effort.

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