Any conception of critical theory and any definition of critical practice must necessarily be provisional: it is a question of grasping and consolidating the current moment, while recognising that this is a moment within processes of ongoing generative change, involving theoretical developments, shifts in policy and practice, and continual transformations within social formations. A critical approach may be seen to denote ways of thinking and working that continually challenge the taken-for-grantedness of modernism (and the potential for nihilistic relativism within postmodernism), and open up possibilities for movement wherever oppression and collusion may currently be embedded. It may remain in an uneasy relationship with modernity (or postmodernity): it cannot occupy a territory that is entirely separate from dominant cultural, material or emotional formations, nor can it stand totally apart from their legacy as a context of thought and practice. It must therefore locate itself on the margins – sufficiently outside the mainstream so as to retain a critical edge, but not so far away as to lose contact and leverage. From such a position, it may also have the potential to engage with and ‘turn’ elements of modernist and postmodern approaches, as part of a wider emancipatory strategy.

What have emerged from the discussions that have been developed in the preceding chapters, have been particular ways of integrating and extending various bodies of critical social theory, and augmenting these by the appropriation of certain modernist concepts and ideas. Taking account of poststructural as well as structural developments in theory, it is possible to proceed on the basis of a more integrative ‘mapping’ of power relations, one that does not assume ultimate precedence of ‘local’ or ‘societal’ in determining priorities and processes of change. Similarly, ‘material’, ‘discursive’ or ‘emotional’ levels of social relations may be
seen as potentially of equal importance in their own right, and each may be seen as mutually implicated in and influencing of the other. Such an inclusive approach opens up the possibility of drawing together elements from a range of practice traditions that each have the potential to engage with certain aspects of the operation of power.

While these perspectives do not always knit easily to form some seamless whole, significant points of linkage may be established, and tentative frameworks may emerge by which to understand limiting and productive operations of power, the construction of identity and subjectivity, and the trajectories by which emancipatory transformations may take place. However, such marriages are not straightforward. Many approaches are partially defined around a rejection of alternative viewpoints, and may also incorporate within them more reactionary elements of modernist thinking. They may rest on particular narrow understandings of power and be implicitly collusive in their non-recognition of other registers of power issues. It thus becomes important to worry away at the generative tensions that may exist between different approaches. In this way, it may be possible to move beyond the competing claims of alternative perspectives, and to build on each of them in order to assemble a fuller vision of the operation of power in particular instances.

What emerges from this is a way of approaching social reality that is very different from that of modernism. Instead of presupposing a duality of objective (and relatively fixed) entities and regularities, set against ethereal notions of subjective experience and individual agency, there opens up a world of dynamic instabilities, in which everything may be seen to depend on everything else, and all relationships and positionings may potentially be imbued with power and generative tension. By problematising the illusory separateness of ‘society’ and ‘individual’, a more fluid account of identities, subjectivities and social structures emerges which can provide a basis for transcending simplistic notions of agency and determination. Change may be seen to come about through much more complex processes of interconnexion and interdetermination, where power may be seen to operate both within and between subjectivities and structures. Within this, rationality may no longer be seen as the authority that guarantees the orderly progress of social relations, as conflicts and tensions at material, emotional and discursive levels of social relations may be seen to be key drivers of change.

It has been argued that much of human service practice may be seen to involve engaging in some way with situations of deprivation, dis-