



The right to the city as an anti-capitalist struggle

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review of

Harvey, D. (2012) *Rebel cities: From the right to the city to the urban revolution*. London and New York, NY: Verso. (PB, pp. 208, £9.99, ISBN 9781781680742)

Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution is a book that draws on the very interesting idea, initially proposed by Henri Lefebvre in 1968, about the need for a renewed and transformed urban life. Lefebvre dubbed this need for transformation of the urban landscape and life ‘right to the city’: a right that those producing and sustaining the city lack and must fight to claim. The author of the book, David Harvey, is a great proponent of Lefebvre’s idea and has given his own view on what the ‘right to the city’ means in his influential, homonymous article for the New Left Review in 2008. A slightly modified version of Harvey’s article ‘The right to the city’ can be found in Chapter 1 of the book. In fact, the whole book is a collection of modified articles that have been published in the past and this is a good explanation on why it reads somewhat awkwardly at times; there is a sense of discontinuity. However, Harvey’s argument regarding the ‘right to the city’ and its importance for the anti-capitalist struggle is very interesting and logically structured.

Harvey’s main attempt in this book is to provide a meaning, an anti-capitalist and revolutionary meaning, to the ‘right to the city’, which he argues is currently an ‘empty signifier’: a right whose meaning has yet to be defined. In this sense, he sees the ‘right to the city’ not as a right that already exists, not as merely a right to citizenship as it has been mostly understood, but as a collective struggle by all

those that have a part in producing the city and creating the life in it, to claim the right to decide what kind of urbanism they want. Harvey argues that the collective labour that produces the city and its infrastructure, mostly builders and constructors, and those that create life in the city, various social and cultural groups whose activities and way of living enriches and produces city-life, are lacking the 'right to the city' because of the prevailing of capitalist urbanization.

Thus, as Harvey rightly observes, the process of urbanization has become capitalistic, as a matter of fact it has become an instrument in the hands of capitalists and a central feature for the reproduction of capitalism. The author employs a Marxist approach on the phenomenon of contemporary cities and understands them as the result of 'geographical and social concentration' of surplus product, which, as he says, make them a class phenomenon, since surpluses must have been extracted from somewhere, i.e. the working class. Hence, the type of urbanization that produced and still produces cities around the world requires surplus product that is perpetually produced by capitalism. But the relation between this type of urbanization and capitalism is bidirectional. Harvey writes (5): 'This means that capitalism is perpetually producing the surplus product that urbanization requires. The reverse relation also holds. Capitalism needs urbanization to absorb the surplus products it perpetually produces'. The renovations of Paris in the mid-nineteenth century and of post-WWII New York based on the planning of Georges Haussmann and Robert Moses respectively, are two major examples in which the use of urbanization by capitalism, to absorb the surplus product, is clear. The result in both cases was the emergence of a new lifestyle that also, especially in the case of New York, gave rise to consumerism.

But, capitalist urbanization has another, even darker nature according to Harvey: the urban restructuring takes place through a process of 'displacement and dispossession'. This means usually that poorer and less powerful populations are losing their place and space in the city. Margaret Thatcher's privatization project of social housing, for instance, produced a housing price-structure throughout the metropolitan area of the city of London that made it impossible for low-income and even middle-class people to have access to housing anywhere near the city centre. The commodification of the city and the 'urban development along class lines' (63) is a global phenomenon that has sustained capital accumulation the past years through the absorption of surplus liquidity and over-accumulated capital in urbanization, according to Harvey.

Capitalist urbanization, then, Harvey argues is a class phenomenon where the capitalist class uses predatory practices of exploitation and dispossession over vulnerable populations diminishing, in this way, their capacity to sustain the

necessary conditions for social reproduction. In fact, the author says that the better the common qualities a social group creates, the more likely it is to be raided and appropriated by private profit-maximizing interests. So those who had created interesting and vibrant neighbourhoods lose them, through the use of predatory practices, to upper class consumers and capitalists. The privatization of housing and commodification of the city (rent) which is based on the power of monopoly of private owners over assets has become the main predatory practice of capitalists against the low-income classes.

Harvey argues that contemporary cities have been turned into commodities by the prevailing of neoliberalist ‘ethic of intense possessive individualism’ (14), while the commons have also been destroyed and turned into gated communities; privatized public spaces that are under constant surveillance. The commons are important urban relationships between social groups and usually public spaces or traditions that sustain and reproduce life in the city: ‘At the heart of the practice of communing lies the principle that the relation between the social group and the aspect of the environment being treated as a common shall be both collective and non-commodified’ (73). However, neoliberal politics of privatization have commodified the commons and diminished financing for public spaces, which are crucial for the creation of commons. In other words, the city-life of lower-income populations is constantly under attack by neoliberals. But it is also the state that is under assault by neoliberalism, according to Harvey; an assault that attempts to diminish the state’s control over the surplus produced. At this point, Harvey, following the Marxist view, considers as a solution against the neoliberal assault the reformation of the state by bringing it back under democratic control.

Harvey, through his analysis in the first section of the book, attempts, successfully in my opinion, to present to us how the existing type of urbanization is associated with capitalism and is itself a class phenomenon. As a part of his analysis, he brings to our attention the fact that numerous crises since 1973 are property or urban-development led and that there is a tight connection between property markets and the macro-economy. This is a connection that has to be carefully re-examined as it has been overlooked by Marxist theorists in their analysis of crises, including the recent one of 2007–09, according to Harvey. This way, Harvey argues, the role of property market can be included into the general theory of the laws of motion of capital and we will be able to better understand the dynamics of contemporary crises, which are as urban as they ever were.

The first section closes with a chapter dedicated to the ‘art of rent’: the main predatory practice used by capitalists against lower-income classes. The author says that monopoly of rent or ‘monopoly rent’ is always an object of capitalist

desire as monopoly over ownership of the means of production, including finance and land is fundamental to capitalism. It seems like a contradiction in terms to talk of monopolization as the object of capitalism's desire especially for neoliberalism, which is all about free, unregulated competition. However, Harvey reminds us that, according to Marx, competition leads eventually to oligopolies and monopolies and the fiercer it is, as in the case of neoliberalism, the faster it will lead to them. The power of monopoly of private property is therefore the alpha and omega of capitalism; its starting and ending point.

As I have already stated, in the first section of the book the author achieves his main goal and proves that the existing form of urbanization is foundational for the reproduction of capitalism. By doing so, Harvey sets the stage for his second main argument, which is examined in the second section of the book, that the city is a major site of political, social and class struggles and that different forms of urbanization should become central to anti-capitalist struggles. The 'right to the city', then, a widely neglected and degraded right as the author argues, should be understood as a struggle for radical change and transformation that will eliminate the capitalist tactics of urbanization and re-create the city in a socialist image.

The author introduces his second main argument by reminding us the long history of urban struggles, from the revolutionary movements in Paris in 1789 to the Paris commune in 1871 and the Seattle general strike of 1919 to the movements in various US cities in 1968. He also emphasizes on the fact that actual city-site characteristics, such as architecture and infrastructure are important and have been used as weapons in political struggles. Harvey argues, then, that because of the site's importance in urban struggles, political power has, in various cases, reorganized urban infrastructures and life in order to keep resisting populations under control, with Haussmann's boulevards in Paris being the great example.

No matter how historically important urban struggles have been, urban social movements have not been seen as anti-capitalist, as they do not have their roots in the exploitation and alienation of living labour in production, Harvey argues. Because of this, Harvey writes, 'Within the Marxist tradition, for example, urban struggles tend to be either ignored or dismissed as devoid of revolutionary potential and significance' (120). Instead, Marxist tradition conceives anti-capitalist struggle to be about the abolition of the class relation between capital and labour in production that permits the production and appropriation of surplus value by capital. It is, then, due to the Marxist tenacity to consider the factory as the place where class struggles are mainly taking place that made 'the industrial working class the vanguard of the proletariat'; its main revolutionary

agent. This understanding must, in Harvey's view, change and the focus should move from the factory to the city as the prime site of class struggle, because it is builders and construction workers that assist the production or produce the surplus value.

Harvey's proposal of changing the focus from the factory to the city and living spaces is, in my opinion, the most interesting idea presented in the book. What Harvey is proposing would change the view held, falsely, by many that a class-based movement such as the Paris Commune is not considered as anti-capitalist because it was not produced by factory workers. In addition, most conventional labour struggles waged by factory-based workers turn out to have had much broader base, conventional workplaces are disappearing and the wealthy classes are more vulnerable in the urban environment, in terms of the value of the assets they control. In the end, as Harvey argues, the ultimate aim of anti-capitalist struggle is the abolition of that class relation and all that goes with it, no matter where it occurs. So, the anti-capitalist struggle, except from organizing and re-organizing within the labour process, should also be about finding a political and social alternative to the capitalist law of value that regulates the world market, according to Harvey.

Abolishing the power of the capitalist law of value across the world market is a demanding and difficult target, as it requires the abolition of the dominant class relation that underpins and mandates the perpetual expansion of surplus value production and realization. A foundational re-conceptualization of the nature of class and a redefinition of the terrain of class struggles is, then, necessary according to the author. For an urban revolution, to be successful in our world of neoliberal globalization, Harvey argues that there should be a strong and vibrant support from popular forces, the concept of work should entail the labour for the production and reproduction of an increasingly urbanized daily life, and an equal status should be given to struggles of the workers against the recuperation and realization of surplus value in their living spaces. Harvey, following Lefebvre's theory of urban revolutionary movements, believes that there is no need to wait for 'the grand revolution' but that a successful urban revolution can be the result of a spontaneous coming together of different unrelated groups, which in a moment of eruption suddenly realize that their collective action can produce something radically different.

Harvey closes chapter five, which is the last chapter of the book, by approaching the very difficult question of 'how to organize a city' in an anti-capitalist way; to carry the anti-capitalist struggle and to produce and sustain an alternative to capitalist urbanization. In his search for an answer, he examines a number of approaches, Murray Bookchin's 'confederalism' among them, and he concludes

that there may be a need for some kind of hierarchical organization that will establish and police the rules that will apply from the lower to the higher scale; from the municipal assemblies to the confederal councils. In general, he argues for an anti-capitalist organization, through urban networks, that will be hierarchical (but not monocentric), democratic and egalitarian; and above all deeply engaged in the struggle against the capitalist laws of value that dictate the social relations under which we work and live. In Harvey's words:

The organization of informal labourers along traditional union lines, the pulling together of the Federation of neighbourhood associations, the politicization of urban rural relations, the creation of nested hierarchies and of leadership structures alongside egalitarian assemblies, the mobilization of the forces of culture and of collective memories – all provide models for thinking about what might consciously be done to reclaim cities for anti-capitalist struggle. (150)

All in all, the book contains some very interesting ideas and the author's main point – the need for the right to the city to become an anti-capitalist struggle – is clear and valid. However, I believe that the spontaneous coming together of unrelated groups under the banner of anti-capitalism entails a lot of wishful thinking and it also contradicts the methodical work needed to change the focus from the factory to the city, which the author proposes. Capitalism and the various authoritarian, hierarchical and exploitative regimes have been established over time, through methodical work, and I cannot see them disappear suddenly, through spontaneous action. I understand, however, the author's anxiousness for revolutionary action that will take place here and now instead of action that is postponed until the time will be supposedly right for the grand revolution to take place.

Harvey's call for revolutionary action and his justifiable need to believe that the urban movements of today can bring forth radical change is also apparent in the last two, very short, chapters of the book, in which he briefly comments on the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York and the uprising in London 2011. In the last chapter of the book, Harvey moves a step further and argues that: 'The struggle that has broken out – that of the People versus the Party of Wall Street – is crucial to our collective future. The struggle is global as well as local in nature' (164). At this point Harvey refers to the various struggles around the world, from Chile to Syria and from China to Greece as a global struggle of the People against the capitalist ideology represented by the Party of Wall Street. I agree with and support the view that revolutionary actions occur and should occur every day whether it is through individual or group action, but seeing the beginning of radical change in every symbolic action or organized protest such as the movement of *Indignados* in Spain, the Occupy Movement in London or the striking workers in Greece is, at least, overly optimistic. In addition, I think that the last two, very brief, chapters of the

book could have either been combined together alongside a deeper analysis of urban movements and their operation since the crisis that started in 2007 to form a complete chapter or not be there at all.

references

- Lefebvre, H. (1968) *Le droit à la ville*. Paris: Éditions Anthropos.
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