

David Harvey: City as space for change

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David Harvey (born 1934) is a prominent contemporary Marxist thinker and one of the most cited authors in the fields of geography, political economy and historical & urban studies and as such influenced by Marx, Engels and the French Marxist Humanist Henri Lefebvre.

David Harvey has a PhD in Geography from Cambridge. His early writing is seminal in development of modern geography, applying principles of Philosophy of Science to that field. He influenced the development of Marxist, Critical or Human Geography. His interests then moved to understanding social injustice and a criticism of the capitalist system.

He is currently Professor of Anthropology and Geography at the Graduate Centre of the City University of New York. He has at different points of time held prestigious positions at the University of Bristol, John Hopkins University, Oxford University and the London School of Economics. He influenced the establishment of LSE Cities which remains a progressive centre for thought leadership in multidisciplinary urban studies. He is a militant proponent of the idea of the right to the city articulated by Lefebvre in 1968 in his work 'Le Droit a la ville'

David Harvey, like Lefebvre, is a prolific writer with more than 25 influential books and several articles to his credit over the past half a century; from 1969 till 2014. *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (2003), *Social Justice and the City* (1973, 2009), *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (2012) are important reading for anyone interested in contemporary urban studies. *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (2014) he has declared is his most important and probably last book. Throughout these long years Harvey is steadily anchored in the overall world view of Marx & Engels and Das Kapital and manages to find a certain explanation of all social / urban conflicts there in.

Like many others of his tribe Harvey is an effective communicator- their conviction makes them convincing. His ability to embrace new communication media allows him to reach out to a much wider audience than his readers. His conferences are lively as he succeeds in conveying complex ideas in simple language making him a very sought after speaker in scholarly as well as more general (socialist) forum. His official website, davidharvey.org, offers a tempting open course with comprehensive chapterized reading of the two volumes of Marx's Capital.



Fig. 1 Tahrir Square, Cairo 2011



Fig. 2 Gezi Park, Istanbul 2013

"Change life! Change Society! These ideas lose completely their meaning without producing an appropriate space.... new social relations demand a new space, and vice-versa"

Henri Lefebvre in *Production of Space / Production de l'espace*, 1974, Paris

This quote summarises Harvey's view about the city as a place for social and political transformation. It is the ever-changing 'new space' that will incubate new ideas; for social transformation if not revolution! It's a positivist vision that recognises the creative energy of the city; the energy to invent a new tomorrow.

Harvey's interest in cities started with the observation of civil right protests which he could see closely in Baltimore and students movements in Europe and the USA in the 1960's; in particular the pivotal Mai '68 students revolt in Paris which is perhaps the closest one got to a Marxist revolution in an established capitalist society since the 1871 Commune in the same city, which also witnessed the first people's revolution in 1787-99. The fact that these 3 transformative events happened in the same city cannot be a coincidence- which is why Harvey designates Paris as the birthplace of modernity. It also creates a premise to link urban form and behaviour. Paris had always maintained a culture of contestation.

The city is thus an integral and indispensable part of the Marxist revolution- not the immediate 'revolution tomorrow' but a gradual and continuous social project- and it must afford the space for this project. The Arab spring, Istanbul protest in 2013, anti-World cup protests in Sao-Paolo 2013 and the Occupy movement are essentially urban events that are contemporary expressions of the class struggle as people feel alienated in their living environment. These events are often linked to a specific urban space-; Tahrir Square in Cairo, Gezi Park in Istanbul; and may not have happened without them. Harvey feels that cities should encourage social movements, communes and be a theatre for anti-capitalist organisation that can propose alternative models of land ownership that privileges 'use' values that serve a social purpose over 'exchange' values that extract wealth from urban processes without supporting them- as in the capitalist / neoliberal city of our times.



Fig. 3 Paris, the 1871 Commune and the Haussmann works. Birth of the modern city

Harvey pertinently supports his observation about the link between urban form and political control with the example of the urban transformation of Paris by Haussmann, chosen by Emperor Napoleon III for massive reconfiguration of the public space basically aimed at making the protest prone city much more easier to police. These massive transformations were debt funded allowing Parisian bourgeoisie an outlet for their capital surplus. The modern city, the one funded by private equity and public debt, was born. Luckily Haussmann's projects were restricted to the main boulevards and did leave many parts of the city untouched and Paris still retains its culture of contestation and the May'68 student revolt was possible. Fortunately, its political project failed but the social impact on the French society was deep.

The Capitalist city serves the accumulation of wealth by dispossession of the working class. It does so precisely by obstructing social organisation that could generate subversive new ideas for social and political reform, for creation urban communes. The sprawling suburb, characteristic of the American cities, is one such obstruction- one cannot imagine a dissent in

the suburbs. The house mortgage is another obstruction- workers with mortgage are definitely less likely to participate in an organised protest against exploitation or any other social injustice. Similarly students with vast education loans are very likely to become obedient conformist and not inclined to 'rock the boat'. Debt and consumerism are effective tools against anti-capitalist organisation. Rampant urbanisation in the recent years, in India, China, Africa, Middle East, is largely driven by surplus from global capital markets. In fact China's frantic city-building has allowed a quicker recovery from the 2008 financial meltdown. Existing cities are growing and new ones are being created through dispossession of the working class in the inner cities or of agricultural, rural or even tribal communities in the peri-urban or green-field sites. This growth on steroids is only intended to park surplus capital rather than for any



Fig. 4 Occupy Wall Street. Space for Dissent



Fig. 5 The Suburbs. Space for Conformism

habitation. This is confirmed by the fact that in Mumbai property acquisition prices have skyrocketed in the past few years whereas as rental costs, which are a more direct reflection of market viability, are steady or have increased only nominally.

The other form of obstruction to social organisation in the city is crass consumerism. The revolution can wait- as we sip cappuccinos at Starbucks! Apart from the unfathomable environmental, cost unbridled consumerism is encouraging high family debt for housing, education, healthcare but also for non-essential expenditure such as purchase of cars, holidays, fashion etc. As discussed earlier a debt ridden family is vulnerable and thus less prone to protest and more ready for exploitation.

Harvey is deeply disturbed by the militarisation of urban conflict. Dissent has always been curbed by force but increasingly one can see quasi-military forces are deployed to repress even anodyne protest. This would be the most direct, violent and intimidating obstruction to social organisation as most would desist out of fear.

Harvey, and many others, believes that the real estate boom of the recent years is a window dressing for an impending financial crisis that is just around the corner. Accumulation of wealth cannot continue forever. The urban conflicts are in fact expression of people's claims on their space and a symptom of this crisis.

The city has always been a privileged place for dissent and subsequently for social and political transformation. Harvey observes that the neo-liberalism is suppressing this aspect of the city by eliminating the very (public) space for dissent. I was reminded of Jordanian Master Architect Rasem Badran's explanation about why he refused a commission from the Egyptian government to build a memorial at the Tahrir Square precisely because he felt that the square should remain open for the next popular protest.

Harvey has consistently canvassed for Lefebvre's The Right to the City. It is much more than a question of access to the amenities and services that the city may provide, but a more fundamental socio-political right. It is often quoted that we define our built environment and it defines us in return. Thus the kind of cities we build will define the kind of societies we will create. It is thus important that people have a bigger role to play in shaping their city because it will eventually shape the society they will live in.

Harvey's observations are pertinent. His writing and lectures, in the best Marxist tradition, are very lucid and engaging. They are much like a political pamphlet aimed at convincing you to rally round the cause. He is firmly rooted in a Marxist worldview with a strong desire to 'force-fit' everything in a class struggle equation. There are many ongoing conflicts today but no signs of any impending 'Marxist revolution'. That may have been a real possibility in the 1960's. Harvey is clearly aware of the changes in the very nature of work, production and employment in the global digital age but still insists on framing its analysis in a model formulated in the early industrial era.

There is no doubt that the capitalist system and the consumerism it has led to has its unsustainable aberrations, especially in terms of the environmental impact, but one can expect those to be corrected. The real world experiments with Marxism created the most oppressive state apparatus ever known to mankind. There is no reason why things would be any different now.

Harvey's belief that cities are the theatre for social and political transformation is an historical fact. However his concern that this capacity is compromised in the neoliberal city is only partly true. The physical space for dissent is shrinking but a virtual space is being created. The internet and social media offer a new venues for dissent and protest that is difficult if not impossible to police. Protests in both Cairo and Istanbul gained momentum via the extensive use of social media. Even ISIS is able to reach potential recruits from Europe to Australia by the same means. This is most likely to be an age of armchair dissent via the internet. This is why the issue of net neutrality is a key one.

I would not share Harvey's commitment to the idea of the city as a tool for continuous revolution but certainly agree that it plays a role in the creation of a more just and equitable society. His concern on the increasing influence of surplus capital in shaping our cities is absolutely right and needs to be addressed with a regulation of the real-estate industry so that it serves 'use' rather than 'exchange'. The right to the city is clearly an important struggle of our times to ensure that wealth extracted from the urban process is not at expense of dispossession.

The city is simultaneously the space for social transformation, political control and wealth extraction and everything is fine until only one of these factors start shaping it.