The recent wave of emancipatory events, from the Occupy Wall Street movement to the revolts in Greece, Turkey, Egypt and Brazil, has renewed the contention that the city is a critical source of social change and radical and utopian thinking. Each of these events has played out as a predominantly urban movement, and injected life into the idea that the city is a critical arena for the creation and mobilization of anti-capitalist struggle. David Harvey’s new book, Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution, is a timely proclamation of the need to understand the city as precisely this site of contention and as an analytic category for understanding the dynamics and contradictions of capital accumulation. Extending the work of Henri Lefebvre, the book challenges the historical materialist tendency to see the urban as the mere bearer of larger and more fundamental processes, and as the site for the expression of deeper currents of struggle. The need to once again focus on the city, Harvey insists, does not arise out of theoretical fashion but instead is a function of what has been going on in the streets.

The first two chapters of the book are dedicated to excavating the inner connection between capitalism and urbanization – a connection that has long animated Harvey’s writings. Harvey argues that the history of capitalist urbanization has been marked by the need to circumvent various barriers to achieving balanced accumulation, and that the production of the urban has thereby played a particularly active role in absorbing both surplus capital and labour. Vast programs of urban infrastructural investment are understood as integral means by which re-occurring and systemic crises of
overproduction and underemployment are temporally offset. He cites the crisis of 1848, the great depression of the 1930s, the post-WWII era, and the aftermath of the recession and fiscal crisis of the early 1970s, as moments where the urbanization process became increasingly globalized. Similarly, he argues that the massive projects of urbanization in contemporary China have functioned to sustain a crisis-ridden global capitalism, through the ability to absorb vast pools of surplus liquidity and overaccumulated capital.

Yet Harvey suggests that this activity runs the risk of reproducing at a later date the very overaccumulation problems it has thus far averted. He argues that investments in the built environment are inherently speculative in the long run, given that they necessitate the coordination of finance capital and the credit system in the production, circulation and realization of capital flows. Such activity runs the risk that flows of ‘fictitious capital’ will outrun the sufficient value production that must ultimately underlie it. For Harvey, this is exactly what happened in the crisis of 2007-8, where copious amounts of fictitious capital flowed into housing to fuel demand backed by low interest mortgages, in the face of insufficient value-creation through production. Should the current model in China succumb to similar crisis tendencies (which it is by no means entirely insulated from), global capital, he argues, would certainly be in dire straights.

While the urbanization process is critical to balancing capital accumulation, Harvey argues that this process is achieved through reoccurring bouts of creative destruction. This process is not only tremendously ecologically damaging, but it dispossesses entire populations of their right to define the city and by extension their labour power, cultural and political values - in effect their very subjectivities - “after their hearts’ desire” (p.25). Such processes of dispossession have historically culminated in wide-scale urban movements, such as in the Paris Commune in 1871, or urban social
movements of 1968, where those who built, maintained and made up the city’s social fabric, engaged in a struggle to wrestle it back from capitalist developers and an entrepreneurial state in the hopes of defining a fundamentally different way of urban living. If these historical cases act as any kind of guide, we are forced to ask if the conditions for an urban movement on the scale of the Paris Commune or May ‘68 are emergent.

While the first two chapters focus on the way in which the logic of capital accumulation comes to dominate the urban process, chapters 3 and 4 turn to explore the urbanization process and its emancipatory possibilities from the perspective of those who produce and reproduce the city on a daily basis. To do this, Harvey turns his attention to the notion of the urban commons and its relation to the concept of the ‘right to the city’, both of which have undergone a certain revival in the aftermath of recent urban protests movements.

Harvey argues that the notion of the common is not a thing, or even a process, but defines it as a social relation between a given group and that aspect of the social or physical environment that is “collective and non-commodified - off-limits to the logic of market exchange and market valuation” (p.73). For Harvey, the urban commons and human qualities of the city are continuously produced by collective labour, at the same time as they are subject to perpetual enclosure and appropriation by capital through monetization and commodification.

On this question, Harvey explores in depth how local cultural distinctiveness is drawn into the calculus of political economy through the search for monopoly rents. In a climate of intense inter-urban competition, Harvey argues that developers and local entrepreneurial states attempt to appropriate and trade on the uniqueness of local cultural
innovations, values, traditions, and memories. These unique qualities serve as marks of distinction, and function as a sort of symbolic capital, promising to yield financial returns. Such a process not only pushes those who produced the distinctive local cultures out of their neighbourhoods through rising land values, but also paradoxically erases any monopoly advantages, as local products lose their uniqueness through commodification (Zukin 2010).

Along these lines, the ‘right to the city’ can be framed as a struggle against the powers of capital to commodify, appropriate and extract rents and value from common life that others have produced. Anti-capitalist urban struggle might then centre on demanding collective rights over the conditions of our labouring (much of which is indeed directed towards producing and reproducing the city), as well as over our collective products. These include not only commodities and local cultural creations, but also the very metropolis itself (Hardt and Negri 2009).

In succeeding chapters Harvey argues that anti-capitalist struggle might reasonably focus and organize at the level of the city. Harvey’s work here is explicitly directed towards challenging the Marxian orthodoxy of seeing urban social movements as ancillary to class politics by virtue of their constitution as processes of social reproduction or citizenship and not production per se.

Following Lefebvre (1991), Harvey argues that Marxism is hobbled by narrow understandings of class and class struggle, which privilege the workshop or factory as the site for the production of surplus value. Such theorizing fails to consider that urbanization is itself produced. All those who produce and reproduce the city (including construction workers and engineers who build and re-build infrastructures, those who mine metals that go into construction, those who are employed in the food chain that
links the rural and urban, as well as domestic workers), are essential to the reproduction
of class relations between labour and capital. Furthermore, class exploitation, as Harvey
argues, is not confined to the workplace but includes whole economies of dispossession
that are critical to the overall dynamics of capital accumulation, and are felt in the ‘living
space’ rather than the factory. Understanding that class struggle is not limited to the
workplace but rather extends to the reproduction of daily life, opens Marxism further to
the gendered and racialized composition of oppositional politics.

Having argued that struggles in the wider metropolis are as important to anti-
capitalist politics as those occurring at the point of production, Harvey focuses on how
we might begin to organize a city in a manner that is more just, democratic and
ecologically sensitive. While he suggests that a great deal of energy on the Left has
focused on the politics of local resistance and worker control over labour processes, little
concrete theorizing has focused on how these processes might be coordinated and linked
to wider metropolitan, regional or global networks. Suggesting that most theorizing on
the subject suffers from what he calls a “fetishism of organizational form”(p.125),
Harvey argues that the organization of production across networks and scales will require
some form of territorial governance and hierarchical enforcement and constraint. For
Harvey, the Left’s espousal of a politics of radical decentralization, horizontality, localism
and autonomy, fit all too neatly with neoliberal class strategies of social reproduction. As
a pure tactic, local autonomy and polycentrism are problematic in so far they are
incapable of both preventing the escalation of inequalities between communities and
adequately redistributing wealth and common resources across municipalities. Instead,
we need some type of creatively employed “double-pronged attack” (p.88) whereby the
state is required to supply more in the way of public goods for public services, coupled with various forms of self-organization.

*Rebel Cities*, like a great deal of Harvey’s work, functions to provoke and re-vitalize Marxism in our present conjuncture. In the book we find a collection of Harvey’s analyses on the urban dimensions of the accumulation process, as well as more recent theorizations on the link between property crises and fiscal crises, which remain critical for understanding the contradictions and instabilities of contemporary capitalist reproduction. This is coupled with his exposition of Lefebvre’s re-conceptualizations of class, and his extension of the ‘traditional’ boundaries of class struggle, which are essential for the reconstruction of a Marxist program capable of speaking to radical and transformative contemporary politics. We also find in *Rebel Cities* some of Harvey’s most explicit and cogent theorizations on potential alternative organizational forms that might displace those that are ruled by the law of value. This reengages late-nineteenth-century debates between anarchists and communists, repositing them on new bases and in light of contemporary circumstances. The turn to such proposals in Harvey’s recent writings (see Harvey 2010: 215-260), likely stem from his sense that while a critical space has been opened up by recent anti-capitalist riots and protests such as Occupy, these expressions of dissatisfaction, anger and ennui have yet to translate into a more proactive and visionary program of socio-political change.

While the book is a timely exploration and recuperation of these themes, it largely repeats arguments made by Lefebvre more than three decades ago and combines them (somewhat disjointedly) with Harvey’s earlier attempts to provide a more rigorous analysis of how urbanization and the production of space are key to understanding capitalism’s survival (see Harvey 1999; 2003). For readers who are familiar with this
problematic, large parts of the book will likely appear derivative and Harvey’s theoretical parameters perhaps too tightly drawn to address the topic at hand. In numerous places Harvey suggests that existential anxieties and pains, psychogeographical sensibilities, the alienation and meaninglessness of daily urban life, as well as questions of the neoliberal grasp over political subjectivities, are absolutely critical to urban social movements and radical politics. Yet, in Rebel Cities, these kinds of questions are dropped just as quickly as they are raised. Harvey also seems less sensitive (in comparison to many of his previous works), to the uneven geographical dimensions of capital expansion and resistances to those processes. With the exception of a few passages referring to Chile, Bolivia and China (and in spite of his universalizing framework), Harvey focuses primarily on the United States and the ways in which accumulation by dispossession has been felt and resisted there. While it is true that we cannot ask Harvey to do everything, such considerations could likely have been more fully incorporated into this short book, without critically transforming his way of theorizing or disrupting the plenary ambitions of his project. Indeed, while recent protests from the Occupy movement to the uprisings of the Arab world have led to a renewed belief in the potential liberating power of the masses, more hard work needs to be done excavate and cultivate connections between these movements and within the uneven geography of dissent and counter-action.

References


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*July 2013*