

David Harvey

Key urban writings

Harvey, D. (1973) *Social Justice and the City*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Harvey, D. (1982) *The Limits to Capital*. Blackwell.

Harvey, D. (1989) *The Urban Experience*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Harvey, D. (1990) *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Blackwell.

Harvey, D. (2012) *Rebel Cities*. Verso.

Introduction

David Harvey's analysis of the urban dynamics of capitalism has had, over the last four decades, a profound influence both within and beyond his native discipline of geography. Though wide in empirical scope, and analytically complex, at its core Harvey's project is animated by a simple objective: to develop a critical theory explaining the uneven geographical development of capitalism over time. Within this 'the urban' emerges as a distinctive focus of investigation. In itself the focus is unremarkable, as historians had long argued that the city is a central category in understanding the historical development of world markets. Harvey, though, is distinguished by a specific emphasis on processes capable of creating and destroying urban forms of social life. In this respect, his work is both indebted to Marx's thesis that capital must be studied not as a 'thing' but a social process riven with contradictions, and defined by the proposition that 'the urban' is the social process where these contradictions crystallise out in the production of landscapes, institutions and cultures. The scale of Harvey's intellectual ambition is only matched by the profound nature of its political intention. If, for Marx, changing the world requires understanding how capital works, for Harvey, changing the world begins with understanding the urbanisation of capital.

Academic biography and research focus

Born in Gillingham, Kent in 1935, Harvey gained his PhD in Geography from the University of Cambridge in 1961. By the end of the sixties, Harvey's contributions already placed him at the forefront of his field. Published in 1969 his first book *Explanation in Geography* offered a comprehensive account of the methodologies geographers deploy to construct knowledge of the external world. Instantly recognised as a seminal work, Harvey was placed at the vanguard of a so-called 'quantitative revolution' seeking to consolidate the analytical foundations of geographical theory. The impact of the book rewarded him with tenure at the elite US institution, Johns Hopkins in the city of Baltimore. Yet, soon after landing in the States, witnessing the social fabric of American society being tested to destruction, shook Harvey from his positivist slumbers. The assassination of Martin Luther King, the imperial invasion of Vietnam and the urbanisation of racism raised profound questions; not only about the responsibility of intellectuals to confront power, but also the political limits of the geographical imagination. In a

remarkable re-deployment of his own critical method, Harvey's *Social Justice and the City* (1973) set forward a provocative test. If the discipline of geography was to become a social science, then geographers needed to be able to account for those spatial processes which constituted and exacerbated urban inequality. If they couldn't then this raised profound questions about how the construction of cities (as a set of institutional, conceptual as well as physical structures) impeded the development of urban societies.

The precision which Harvey laid out, then dismantled the liberal precepts of urban theory inspired a new generation of urban radicals. Alongside Henri Lefebvre and Manuel Castells, Harvey emerged as part of a new dialectical revolution in urban theory. But where others applied Marx's ideas to spatial concerns, Harvey argued that urban questions could be only partially resolved due to the lacunary treatment of space *within* Marx's thought. The subsequent publication of *Limits to Capital* (1982) was intended to close this gap, showing that the territorial obstacles capital confronts are central to its ability to extend across space and persist over time. Intended to be a historical and theoretical account of capital, uniting logic and method, however, proved a contradiction too far. *Limits* therefore appeared as a book of pure theory with its urban dimensions developed in a pair of companion volumes : *The Urbanization of Capital* and *Consciousness and the Urban Experience* (1988).

Today *Limits to Capital* is widely recognised as a landmark of critical political economy, but on publication it was slow to find an audience. For Marxian economists the interest in space seemed obtuse, and for radical geographers Harvey's commitment to Marxian categories appeared out of step in a climate of identity politics, incipient neoliberalism and post-structural theory. But while the fortunes of Marxian theory waned more than waxed with the sea-change of financial deregulation, Harvey's return to Britain (to take a position at Oxford University) resulted in a work which tried to explain the spatial logic of late capitalism. Appearing at a moment when the momentum of Reaganism and Thatcherism was about to stall, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989) argued that debates about post-Fordism, post-industrialism and post-modernism manifested precisely the opposite of a move beyond capitalism. The rise of more cognitive-cultural forms of capital, for Harvey, manifested the inherently flexible and culturally mutable nature of urban accumulation. What was replacing the managerialist programme of full-employment, Harvey argued, was a fiercely entrepreneurial project of urban consumption.

Returning to John Hopkins in the nineties, Harvey refined his analysis addressing the growing wave of anti-capitalist resistance to globalisation and themes of body politics, ecology and utopianism (1997, 2000). At the turn of the millennium, though expecting to retire, the opening of a position as Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at City University New York (CUNY) marked a remarkable intensification in Harvey's activity. In the wake of the Iraq war and an unimpeded expansion of global markets, Harvey wrote narrative accounts of the rise of

neo-imperialism and neoliberalism (2003, 2005). Both texts consolidated his reputation as one of the few geographers able to find a wide audience as a public intellectual. And with the epochal financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 and the rise of austerity policies, Harvey's recent *Rebel Cities* (2012) has returned to urban questions. Cities encapsulate, Harvey says, the best way to diagnose the urban pathologies of neoliberalism and to develop anti-capitalist alternatives. What the rise of Occupy and the explosive events of Istanbul, Cairo, Athens, Madrid and other cities suggest, for Harvey, is the glimpse of an urban form of constitutive power: a counter-power expressing a right to collectively reshape the urban process.

Key ideas

The recapitulation of Lefebvre's key concept 'the right to the city' is characteristic of Harvey's capacity to keep Marxian ideas alive to contemporary political concerns. This ability, however, is based on a highly original conception of spatial dynamics. To trace the urban contours of Harvey's theory perhaps the best starting point is the notion of the 'spatial fix'. This simple phrase describes the way cities are shaped according to internal tensions between the use-value and exchange-value of space. The idea critiques one of the core assumptions of economic theory: that the incorporation of capital in land, labour and technology is a necessary precondition for economic growth. For Marx, however, the accumulation of capital does not arise through some natural evolution of market exchange and industrial enterprise, but through a 'primary' circuit of productive investment dedicated to capturing increasing surpluses of value created by the labour force. What Harvey points out is that the need to invest in physical infrastructures (factories, shipping facilities, mining operations, railways etc.) and social institutions (of public housing, education, healthcare, etc.) require huge outlays of investment which tie capital up for long periods. What the 'spatial fix' invites urban researchers to consider, therefore, are the socially dynamic consequences of locking capital and labour in place over time.

In the 19th Century this process was spatialised in the form of the factory, the basic unit of production able to exploit an industrial army of wage-slaves. Harvey widens the scope of analysis by asking how does fixed investment play out, not only in terms of the simple site of production but also the expanded field of social reproduction. As the development of cities absorb more and more economic resources, capital becomes immobilised for months, sometimes years in the process of development. The spatio-temporal problems arising from fixing capital in facilities of production (eg. factories) and reproduction (eg. houses) thereby impose constraints on capital mobility, preventing it from realising its most flexible state as money-capital in search of profit. The creation of a glut of overaccumulated capital - a superabundance of economic energy, trapped in the system, unable to realise a profit - tends towards financial crises, requiring the destruction of surplus capital- what the economist Joseph Schumpeter famously called 'creative destruction'. What is, therefore, destructively 'creative' about crisis is the way it allows capital to 'deterritorialize'; taking flight from difficulty in one location, 'reterritorializing' itself

in another space at another moment. Globalisation might be thought of as the paradigmatic form of this process today.

Since investment is always risky the ability to mediate uncertainty is, under capitalism, socially assigned to entrepreneurs. But despite the arrogance normally associated with the entrepreneurial character, the bearers of risk belie a state of anxiety that haunts the entire system. The object of anxiety is the fear that capital, once invested, cannot be turned into money. Hence, the almost neurotic significance that financial agents attach to perpetuating mental states of 'confidence' in capital's ability to compound its rate of return. Clearly, confidence in 'growth' has to depend on something more systematic than mere hope in individual ingenuity. In order to manage the complex 'turnover times' involved in capital fixed in technology, buildings and spatial infrastructure, capitalism requires - if it is to hold its nerve - a 'secondary' circuit of investment to financially overcome the scarcity of credit and the threat of business failure. What a financial market therefore provides are securities (like stocks and bonds) based on expectations of future income subject to speculative risk. Since this kind of 'fictitious capital' (fictitious because it is a claim on revenues yet to be created) is in form comparable to the income landowners receive in projected rent, real-estate (the asset value of capital fixed in land and buildings) may also circulate in a financial market. Thus, urbanisation is not only a vehicle to create physical investments which increase productivity, it is also a process able to accumulate financial claims on the income of urban inhabitants.

Moreover, because land markets and capital markets are entwined, it becomes possible to monetize and monopolize the social, physical and cultural values of cities. With the notion of 'time-space compression' Harvey argues that the financial demand for liquidity - to abolish the 'frictions' of both distance and temporality - gives rise to a capitalist culture that is intrinsically metropolitan. Speculative property bubbles give rise to architectures (like skyscrapers) that concretize the velocity and fungibility of fictitious capital. The idea is indebted to Georg Simmel's classic account of the urban 'lifestyles' which crystallize out of the exchange of money. What is particularly Marxist about Harvey's interpretation, however, is his analysis of the role of the state in using cities to make people's lives dependent on market forces. For Harvey, the post-war shift from an urban capitalism based on Fordist production and Keynesian infrastructure, to neoliberal forms of flexible employment (requiring citizens to rely on debt to fund welfare) has had enormous consequences in the way urban space is developed. And what the irruption of the 2007 - 2008 financial crisis demonstrates, is that the overaccumulation of space and debt can bear down and compress social life so heavily they tear apart its very fabric.

Contributions to Urban Studies

It's only a slight exaggeration to say that it's difficult to imagine what the critical content of urban studies might be without Harvey's contributions. At the very least, the analytical

coherence of Harvey's work has provided urban studies with a theoretical whetstone, sharpening the critical edge of accounts of globalisation, neoliberal urbanism and gentrification (see **Saskia Sassen**, **Neil Brenner** and **Neil Smith** respectively). Which means, that Harvey's contribution cannot be uncoupled from his lifelong 'Marx project' - to reanimate the critique of political economy with a spatial content that finds a popular constituency. As such, the historian Perry Anderson says Harvey "follows Sartre's prescription for a revitalised Marxism very closely... [fusing] the analysis of objective structures with the restitutions of subjective experience... in a single totalizing enterprise." (Harvey 2003, p.15)

For Harvey's critics, however, herein lies the problem. The Marxian project to map the totality of capitalism has led some theorists to warn of anachronism : reading off the cosmopolitics of 21st Century urbanisation against a rubric of 19th Century categories. The implication is that Harvey is a structuralist, historicising struggle in a 'capitalocentric' (Gibson-Graham 1996), masculinist frame (Deutsche 1998), unable to absorb alternative post-Marxist perspectives. Another criticism is that Harvey's commitment to theory has been at the expense of developing a thoroughgoing empirical account of the way capitalism creates cities in its own image (Walker 2004). The issues are complex and continue to be debated. But one way to deal with them is to consider two prospective (rather than retrospective) contributions Harvey's work is making to understand the urban future of capital accumulation and class struggle.

The first is that Harvey's critique provides a timely antidote to the so called 'new urban agenda' which see cities as global engines of 'smart' growth. As the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the crisis of subprime mortgages showed the relationship between economic growth and urban development is far from stable and progressive. Instead, the urbanisation of neoliberalism - through the privatisation of social and physical infrastructure (like roads, schools, hospitals, etc.) - represents, for Harvey, a very primitive form of accumulation. One which uses the urban process to enmesh society in a web of rent-seeking contracts. In this respect Harvey's interest in examining processes of social reproduction (as well as industrial production) as an arena of value extraction, links with an emerging body of literature examining the way biological, environmental, corporeal, cultural and social qualities are becoming increasingly financialised. In particular, Harvey's notion of urbanisation as a process of accumulation by dispossession, tallies with **Saskia Sassen's** (2014) account of the 'expulsive' force of globalisation; one which uses, for example, migration, human trafficking, unemployment and homelessness as social apparatuses that turn debt into a bio-political claim over life.

The second might be called the 'performative' dimension of Harvey's thought. Famously, Harvey has offered a course (usually open to the public) on Marx's *Capital* nearly every year since 1971. In the last few years, the course has been placed online, galvanising a new generation looking for intellectual tools to map the limits to capital. Characteristically, then, perhaps the

best introduction to Harvey's work can be found in a short video on the web.¹ Shot on the backstreets of Istanbul, sat on the stoop of a dwelling marked for 'renewal', Harvey links the neighbourhood evictions of 21st Century Tarlabası to the Haussmannisation of Second Empire Paris - suggesting such spatial processes harbour deep social contradictions. Just a year later, Harvey's revolutionary comparisons would come vividly to life as, just a stone's throw from Tarlabası, protestors against the demolition of Gezi Park made Taksim Square a new frontline of urban struggle. So what the video underlines is Harvey's pedagogical talent to use the experience of everyday life as a method to connect academic research with social concerns, animating political education and activism. In the last analysis, then, perhaps Harvey's central contribution is his dialectical insistence that it is within the 'gift' of urban citizens to free themselves from compounding their 'debt' to capital.

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¹ Tarlabası Istanbul (2012), 'Against vested interest urbanism - An interview with David Harvey.' Available at: <http://www.tarlabasiistanbul.com/2012/06/against-vested-interest-urbanism-an-interview-with-david-harvey/> [Accessed June 23, 2015]