

Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution, David Harvey, Verso, 2012, 208 pages, ISBN: 978-1-84467-882-2, £9.99 (paperback)

David Harvey is one of the most widely read contemporary geographers and probably the most recognized representative of radical geographical thought. To an audience outside of the disciplines of space, he has become widely known through his studies on the economic crisis, neoliberal transformations, and the new imperialism.

Rebel Cities is an important and timely book that sums up the long theoretical route of Harvey's career to date. It is a political and scientific manifesto, with one clear objective: to engage with the movements that have occurred after the emergence of the crisis. Though most of the texts of the book were previously published in magazines and newspapers, it was a highly anticipated project, a condensation of the basic ideas of the author, a "return" to the issues of space, city and urban movements, and a presentation of proposals for an alternative to the society of crisis, neoliberal policies and capitalism of dispossession.

The entire book describes the basic reasoning that is depicted in the subtitle, *From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. Urbanization is one of the most basic processes of accumulation and circulation of capital, especially in times of crisis when capital turns to land, due to the failure of adequate profitability from the cycle of production and consumption. Therefore, cities and space in general, are key fields of claim for the economic and political power, for the circulation and realization of surplus value, which is the basis of any capitalist society. But if this is valid, then cities are also an arena for class struggle and a tool for the anti-capitalist effort, which can open roads to the transcendence of capitalism.

Harvey recognizes in Henri Lefebvre a significant influence on his thought, and he devotes an extensive preface to his vision. The major French theorist was among the first who understood the importance of space and its production for the survival of capitalism and put the right to the city at the center of the demands of social movements. Harvey mentions that the commonly used slogan of the "Right to the City" can become "an empty signifier: everything depends on who gets to fill it with meaning. The financiers and developers can claim it, and have every right to do so. But then so can the homeless and the *sans-papiers*. The definition of the right is itself an object of struggle, and that struggle has to proceed concomitantly with the struggle to materialize it" (page xv). In a sense, this battle over who will win the right to the city, is described in the main part of the book, which is divided into two distinct parts, the first entitled "The Right to the City" and the second "Rebel Cities".

The first part highlights some basic parameters of the contemporary crisis, arguing that it has its roots in the city and especially in the role of urbanization

and investment in land and the built environment after the crisis of the 70s. In Harvey's opinion, the onset of the global crisis in the housing market is no accident. The extreme financialization, the whole unstable financial system was based on land, real estate, urban interventions and transformations towards entrepreneurial cities that must make profit. This was not just a neoliberal choice but a necessary policy in order for capitalism to overcome the structural crisis. Harvey uses a phrase of Binyamin Appelbaum: "Americans recover from recessions by building more homes and filling them with things" (page 50). That is one of the most fundamental aspects of Harvey's work, since the early 80s and *The Limits to Capital* (2006): capital continuously seeks for a temporary and unstable 'spatial fix' to the problems of accumulation from production and consumption, both through investment in the built environment, and through geographical transfer and uneven geographical development.

In a separate chapter, Harvey contributes to the current debate about the commons. Even though he accepts some theoretical assumptions by intellectuals like Elinor Ostrom (1990), he expresses his criticism toward anarchist and autonomist perspectives, mostly on the issues of scale, power and property. Particularly interesting is the section dedicated to the art of rent, which illustrates the constant importance of monopoly of rent on land obtained through strategies such as distinctive places and cultural commons.

The second part of the book focuses on the way that society can reclaim the city for anti-capitalist struggle. Harvey expresses his criticism towards large parts of the "traditional left" for "the underestimation and misunderstanding of the potency of urban based movements for sparking not only radical but also revolutionary changes" (page 120), but also dismisses the opinions of the supporters of the new social movements that present the urban struggles without any class character. His argument is as follows: The main goal of anti-capitalist struggle is the abolition of class relations and capital-labor conflict. However, class and political domination of capital needs a set of procedures in which urbanization plays a central role. Anti-capitalist struggle must not only be organized within the labor process, but also create a different political and social alternative that grows on a local and global level.

We could distinguish three main objectives that are pursued through the text: First, the redefinition of the 'territory' of class struggles. If the accumulation of capital and the transfer of value occur not only through the production, but through the overall circulation of capital until the realization of surplus value, then the fights in all of this process are equally class struggles. Secondly, the expansion of the definition of class. Urbanization is itself produced from millions of workers. Thus, if we accept that labor power is that which creates value, then it is growing, including the millions employed in all the businesses and services that operate within the contemporary cities. Third, the rewriting of the history of workers' struggles, which, even when based on the industrial workers, had much broader influence within the places that took place, as for example the "People's Houses" in Italy that were connected with the factories' councils.

The key question is how to organize an alternative city that promotes social equality and justice and not the accumulation of capital. For the answer, Harvey looks back in revolutions of the past, but also in recent examples from Latin America, searching for the middle road between the local organization and democracy, state power and international coordination.

At this point we come across with the least elaborated part of the book. The “reclaim the city for anticapitalist struggle” demand is reasonable and documented for the movements, but the perspective of hierarchical but not monocentric urban networks seems more like a theoretical hypothesis than a concrete and realistic proposal. The short presentation of this idea, as a conclusion in only one paragraph, weakens further this argument. The absence of cohesion between some chapters intensifies this shortcoming.

Rebel Cities makes for exciting reading. Researchers will find in it a solid scientific methodology in a very critical discipline. The book will also appeal to a global non-academic audience, as a theoretical attempt to contribute to urban social justice struggles, and the finding of an alternative to neoliberal capitalism and the crisis.

References

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