ALTERNATE ROUTES: A JOURNAL OF CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

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BOOK REVIEW

Marx, Capital, and the Madness of Economic Reason, by David Harvey. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. $24.95 U.S., hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-19-069148-6. Pages i-xiv, 1-236.

The Ways of the World, by David Harvey. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. $19.95 U.S. paperback. ISBN: 978-0-19-069051-9. Pages i-viii, 1-376.

Reviewed by Jeff Noonan[1]

David Harvey is one of the world's best known radical intellectuals. He has achieved this status despite the fact that his discipline – geography – is one which, like my own (philosophy) everyone has heard of but would be hard pressed to define if asked. If I were asked, I would risk defining geography as the study of spatial relationships. Since there is no "space" apart from things and people standing in spatial relationships, geography and philosophy have one more thing in common: anything at all can become an object of geographical or philosophical study.

Harvey first came to prominence within geography circles as a student of the formation of urban spaces. His studies of ghetto formation in Baltimore made him realize that what happens in cities cannot be understood apart from what happens within the economic system generally. His interest in particular places thus led him to the study of global political economic dynamics at a time when cities were becoming central to new capitalist growth dynamics and 'globalization' was on everyone's mind.

Over the course of a career that has spanned more than forty years, Harvey has proven that one cannot understand the production of space without understanding the dynamics of capital accumulation. He has also shown that one cannot understand the dynamics of capital accumulation without understanding "the production of space," as his predecessor in the Marxist study of cities Henri Lefebvre put it. Harvey has thus used historical materialism to revolutionise the discipline of geography, and geography to broaden the focus of historical materialism. Spaces, like societies, have a history, and historical materialism is an incomplete science if it cannot explain spatial dynamics and relationships.

Yet this rather arid description does not do complete justice to his achievement. Harvey does not simply interpret the formation of space, his goal is to change it. His alternative future draws on the deepest ethical resources of the Marxist tradition to show the multiple ways in which capitalism constricts and suffocates human potential and how a democratic socialism would better satisfy the natural and social conditions of human self-realization in the concrete spaces in which our lives are lived. The two most recent books I will discuss, *Marx, Capital, and the Madness of Economic Reason* (2018) and *The Ways of the World*, (2016) could both be read as theoretical *resumes* of Harvey's life work. The first re-vindicates the importance of a Marx's critique of political economy, while the second collects ten seminal essays from Harvey's career.

[1] Jeff Noonan is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Windsor and a long-time activist in the Canadian socialist and academic trade union movements. His most recent publications are *The Troubles With Democracy*, (London: Rowman Littlefield International), and *Embodiment and the Meaning of Life* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press).

Marx, Capital, and the Madness of Economic Reason

Marx, Capital, and the Madness of Economic Reason can be read as both an introduction to Marx's critical political economy and an argument in support of a socialist alternative. In comparison to other introductions to Marx's political economy (the most recent that I have read is Johan Fornas's *Capitalism*) Harvey's is lively, readable, and accessible. He ably explains the key concepts of Marx's political economy as these are developed in all three volumes of *Capital*. His eloquent writing style and penchant for the apt explanatory metaphor brings the rather dry categories of *Capital* Volume Two to life, and his application of Marx's work to explain the 2008 financial crisis demonstrates the continued relevance of Marxist political economy.

Harvey stresses the need to treat all three volumes of *Capital* as a unity. "The point of considering capital as a totality [with three phases of valorization, realisation, and distribution] is precisely to recognise how the different phases presuppose and prefigure the others. While each phase is autonomous and independent all phases are subsumed within the movement of the totality" (p.45). Too many Marxists, he argues, focus exclusively on the production of surplus value through the exploitation of labour at the point of production, ignoring how surplus value is realized through profitable sale, as well as how the surplus must be distributed amongst all sectors. Harvey's totalising perspective (which was also Marx's) allows him to take into account aspects of the contemporary capitalist landscape that were not essential in Marx's time but are today. Realizing surplus value as profit requires the timely sale of product, which makes transport and advertising vital components of the capitalist economy and not secondary features. Competition between countries, regions, and cities for capital investment drives public and private investment in the built environment. The dynamics of urbanization in the struggle for locational advantage therefore cannot be ignored.

Harvey is not afraid to note where Marx's nineteenth century categories need to be developed. While Marx laid bare the economic pressure that drives capitalists to substitute technology for labour, he could not have foreseen the extraordinary achievements of computing and communication technology. Harvey's contemporary reflections on Marx's understanding of the relationship between economic competition, technology, and human well-being are a high point of *Marx, Capital, and the Madness of Economic Reason.* He reminds the reader that Marx was not a technological determinist and he did not understand socialism primarily as a techno-scientific achievement (p.112). Consequently, historical change is the outcome of a complex interplay between economic forces generated by competition, technological changes, class struggle, myriad fight backs against oppression, and international clashes between nations struggling for hegemony and control over resources. "Revolution is an on-going process of movements across the different moments." (p. 115) The preponderance of one factor will produce one-sided change; a revolution requires the coherent integration of changes in all spheres, not all at once, but over time.

Harvey's expanded historical materialist understanding of social change serves the purpose of exposing the potentially world-destroying logic of capitalism. The second half of *Marx, Capital, and the Madness of Economic Reason* is an ethical-political argument in favour of the need for a socialist alternative. This part reminded me of his earlier work *Seventeen Contradictions and the Future of Capitalism,* as well as Andre Gorz's 1989 classic, *The Critique of Economic Reason.*

Harvey reiterates the argument he made in *Seventeen Contradictions* and reinforces (without directly referring to him) Gorz's main point: capitalism reduces the world and human life to a one-dimensional economic reason which treats both as quantified inputs into a process that must expand or die. Reforms cannot stop the madness, and in any case, never go so far as to free human life-horizons and potential from subservience to capital.

The madness is thus that planetary life-value is subordinated to money value. Harvey does not always avoid the problems of conceiving socialism in terms of the production of use-values for the satisfaction of wants (p.165). Capitalism produces more than enough use-values: its madness lies precisely in the fact that much of the use-value it produces has no or negative *life*-value. Only once we conceive social problems in these terms can we understand the madness of capitalism at its full ethical depth.

Even though Harvey is a social scientist by trade, I have no compunctions reading his work as, essentially, an ethical critique of capitalism. I use "ethics" in its classical signification to refer to an overall pattern of living (as opposed to an abstract set of rules that must be obeyed). The problem with capitalism is the way of life it imposes upon people. The solution to that problem is to create the conditions for another way of life. Harvey has sounded this bell throughout his career, as the 10 essays that form *Ways of the World* prove.

Ways of the World

The retrospective will allow readers new to Harvey's body of work to trace his development. The essays are linked together by an abiding methodological concern to develop historical materialism to better account for the spatial dynamics of capitalist development and the complexities of political identity formation. I will focus on the four essays which I think add the most to our understanding of both of those problems.

"Monument and Myth" was originally published in 1979. On the surface, it tells the fascinating tale of the construction of *Sacre Coeur* in Paris in the years following the Paris Commune. It reads like a Sebald novel, narrating human events through a commentary on spaces and places: a radical tourist's guide to revolutionary Montmartre. On a deeper level, it brings together the more technical problems of the urbanization process under capitalism with Harvey's appreciation for the complex interplay between economic forces, political movements, and symbolic dimensions of identity formation. In a masterfully written 40 pages, Harvey captivates the reader with the story of the religious-political-economic intrigues which shaped the history of Sacre Coeur's location and construction.

The process reveals the deep connections between the French Roman Catholic Church and high finance. Harvey's relating of the tale uncovers the links between international power politics (the Franco Prussian War) and the urban workers movement in Paris, and the problem of the conflict between patriotism and class, town and country. Harvey reveals that whether we are talking about 1870 or 2020, the look of cities is shaped as much by capital as it is by architects. To be sure, the symbolic dimensions of urban space are not mechanical functions of capital's interests, but nor do they spring freely and fully formed from planner's brains. The essay recapitulates some of the more technical problems of urban geography explored in the three essays

that precede it in the book, but the eloquent articulation of the theory through the narrative of *Sacre Coeur's* construction makes the theory more accessible to non-experts.

The second essay I want to discuss is the more philosophical "The Nature of Environment." Harvey tackles a perennial problem of historical materialism: the relationship between material nature and human social activity. I did not find his solution entirely satisfactory, but he frames the problem with great clarity. Harvey picks up from the position that Marx and Engels first articulated in *The German Ideology* where they chastise Feuerbach for treating nature as some fixed reality independent of human activity. Harvey develops its implications for the understanding of the politics of environmentalism. "It is fundamentally mistaken," he argues, "to speak of the impact of society on an ecosystem as if these were two separate systems in interaction with each other. The typical manner of depicting the world around us in terms of a box labelled "society" in interaction with a box labelled "environment" not only makes little intuitive sense … but it also has no historical justification" (p.190). It might not make intuitive sense if we just look out of the window of our home to a park created by landscape architects or a street laid down by a construction crew. But does it have *no* historical justification?

Marx and Engels (and the Lukacs of *History and Class Consciousness*) are correct as regards the surface of the earth and the troposphere: their manifest forms and chemical composition have been shaped by human social activity. But there was a time before human beings. Human life is the product of billions of years of physical, chemical, and evolutionary processes. These persist as material conditions of life and material constraints on the rationality of social forms. (In the history of Marxism, the neglected work of Sebastiano Timpanaro has urged historical materialists to pay attention to the importance of this *material* nature). Harvey might not disagree (after all, he argues that capitalism is "mad"). Nevertheless, I found that here he over-emphasises the social at the expense of the natural, only some aspects of which are structured by human activity while many remain fixed material realities to which human beings must adapt or die trying to ignore them.

The next paper I want to discuss is arguably Harvey's most important political essay: "Militant Particularism and Global Ambition." Like "Myth and Monument," it weaves a political philosophical argument around a concrete narrative: Harvey's involvement in a struggle to keep a car plant in Oxford open. Harvey's connection to the struggle started as an academic commitment to help edit a collection of essays and interventions, but it brought him into the heart of a political debate between the militant shop stewards leading the fight to keep the plant open and others (with whom he identified) who wondered whether the local struggle was doomed by global trends.

Harvey does not shirk from acknowledging the contradictory tendencies at work in any political struggle and does not pretend that he has all the answers. Those of us who live in industrial cities (I live in Windsor) will understand the dilemma Harvey faced. Plant closure is a permanent threat to workers' livelihoods and is often a catalyst for political action that aims to keep the plant open. One's head might understand that no amount of effort will keep plant's open that have become uneconomical, but one's heart has to side with the workers whose income depends upon their job at the factory. These contradictions between local places and global forces and workers' short-term interests in saving the jobs they depend upon and mobilising for a longer-term struggle for a new society pose the most difficult problem socialists face.

The urgency of workers' needs for employment can overwhelm them, making all talk of a radically different society sound like the pipedreams of academics who remain comfortably employed. At the same time, if no one puts forward long-term goals, then the ravages that capitalism wreaks on local communities will continue. Harvey explores these contradictions with great subtly and insight (helped in his reflections by Raymond William's novels) but does not arrive at a settled conclusion.

The final essay that I will discuss, "Capital Evolves" returns to the problem of the environment-society relationship. I find the position that Harvey adopts here more consistent with a (historical) materialist understanding of nature. He does not reject the view articulated in "The Nature of Environment" that society and the natural world are not completely separate realities, but he does clarify that there are natural processes that operate independently of human will and that exert independent force on human social behaviour. "What we call "nature," while clearly affected by capital accumulation (habitat and species destruction, global warming …) is most certainly not determined by capital accumulation. Evolutionary processes on planet earth are independently occurring all the time" (p.308). The on-going pandemic provides a clear illustration of the problem for historical materialists.

Covid-19 may have spread from animals to human beings because of the proximity of human settlements to habitats that used to be more isolated, but urban expansion did not produce the disease, but rather the mutation of existing coronaviruses. Likewise, the severity of its impact has been intensified by decades of cuts to public health care systems, but treatment and cure requires scientific knowledge of the physical structure of the virus, the biochemistry of vaccines, and so on. Nature and society interpenetrate, but the methods and forms of knowledge required to understand each (and, therefore, to develop a comprehensive understanding of our human bio-social reality) are distinct.

A World to Win

In order to change society for the better, socialists must understand all of the forces that work to keep society as it is or manage change in a capitalist direction. Science and technology are fetishized under capitalism, but that does not mean that their achievements are reducible to capitalist ideology. Their effects on social life are themselves determined by political struggle. But political struggle is not simply a problem of the formation of global class consciousness. People mobilise around any number of issues that affect their lives relative to the identities that shape that experience and affect how others and social institutions treat them. Marx assumed for the most part that as economic crisis grew more severe, differently identified people would identity more and more as workers. The "evolutionary trajectory of capitalism," according to Harvey, is determined by the interaction between seven different "activity spheres": "technologies and organisational forms, social relations, institutional and administrative arrangements, production and labour processes, relations to nature, the reproduction of daily life and of the species, and mental conceptions of the world."(p.309) Coherent systemic change requires that misalignments between any one and the others have to be overcome.

The struggle of the Oxford car workers illustrates the problem. Technological and organisational changes altered the production and labour process upon which the reproduction of their daily life depended. Their conception of the world made them decide to fight for the jobs. A more abstract theoretical focus on long-term trends made that struggle appear as a hopeless rearguard action, but in the absence of being able to offer real material support to the day to day lives of workers, that mental conception of the world sounded hopelessly academic and out of touch.

I imagine there are many socialists who would dispute with Harvey that the problem of political change is really not as fraught and complex as it seems. For that type of socialist every mass mobilisation is a harbinger of the final revolution. But these mass mobilisations have exploded repeatedly over the past thirty years: the anti-globalisation protests of the 1990's, the mobilisation against US imperialism before the second Gulf War, the Arab Spring and Occupy, Black Lives Matter. Through it all – maddeningly – capitalism endures. All the evidence therefore suggests that fundamental change is a long-term and open-ended grind. Harvey's work is an indispensable contribution to understanding the world that we need to change, as well as an honest and illuminating analysis of the challenges that stand in the way of success.