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Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution

by David Harvey

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While David Harvey's ideas on rebel cities presented in his latest book *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* are increasingly analysed, European urban capitals from Athens and Istanbul to Stockholm are already filled with barricades - rebellious people who want to make their cities a better place to live. What is happening in these cities today is also going to happen soon in other European and global cities. However, this is no longer just a matter of the city as a spatial and social order. The issue of rebel cities is crucial for our civilisation, which is, for the first time in its history, both urban and global. Therefore, riots, rebellion, discontent, protests, barricades, fronts and conflicts are no longer localised. They can appear anywhere in the global urban space. It is only the phenomenology of urban rebellions that is temporarily localised: today it is in Istanbul or Stockholm, tomorrow in London, Paris, Barcelona or Rome. But the dynamics of urban rebellion has its own logic - the logic of fluid that can easily overflow from one city and spread to another. Finally, this logic is increasingly manifested as anticapitalist rebellion. In this sense, Harvey's book is not a phenomenology of rebel cities, but an analysis of deeper economic, political and social causes of structural contradictions of capitalism, especially its recent form which has dominated the global urban society in the last thirty years - neoliberalism. Therefore, one cannot read Harvey's discussions about the cities without understanding his critique of neoliberal capitalism presented in the books *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* and *The Enigma of Capital*. Before introducing the main ideas of *Rebel Cities*, it should be noted that in this book Harvey returned to the issues of critical urban sociology with a strong and overt (neo)Marxist approach. Harvey once again stresses that the merit of Marx's approach lies in the possibility to provide "a very clear account of the general laws of motion of capital to be constructed in a way that abstracts from the specific and particular conditions of his time" (David Harvey 2012). However, it is important to say that the issues related to urban sociology have never been really abandoned or even just sporadically tackled in Harvey's books. In all his works the city and the issue of producing the urban way of living in capitalist economic conditions have been present as an unavoidable framework of analysing everyday dynamics of urban life. Ever since his first major book about the city, *Social Justice and the City*, and later *Rebel Cities* and *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, Harvey has been an uncompromising critic of the conditions producing modern urban life. This strong neo-Marxist critical impulse

persisted in his works even when it seemed that Marxism and neo-Marxism were theoretically inadequate, historically anachronistic, methodologically sterile and politically obsolete. In fact, it seems that through the issues of the city Harvey's neo-Marxism managed to reveal what was covered up by the theories of modernisation, postmodernisation and globalisation; by old liberalistic promises of freedom - the promises that were hiding new neoliberal traps of equating freedom with free markets; serious problems of unequal geographical and social development, at the global as well as regional and urban level; and finally, false promises of globalisation (promoted through neoliberalism) that the market world would be a freer, safer and wealthier place. The most appropriate individual case of uneven geographical development (which is a topic Harvey insists on) that could be set as a paradigm of global effects of neoliberalism on modern urban civilisation would be the Argentinian model, which probably in the best way summarises the outcomes produced in thirty years: "the whole episode reeks of a new imperialism: pillage of the economy, growth of vast inequalities, economic stagnation followed by profound and enduring depression and massive impoverishment of the population as a consequence of the greatest concentration of wealth..." (Harvey 2005). Uneven geographical development - observed through uneven development of cities - once again points to the paradoxical nature of the modern world. The promise that urban civilisation would be a better life-world (*lebenswelt*) turned into a paradox in which the nature of our cities has transformed from hope to rebellion and revolt. This urban world has never been wealthier, more powerful and technologically more advanced, and yet, it had never been poorer, crueller and more unjust - but the urban process underwent another transformation of scale. In short, *it went global* (Harvey 2012).

The issues raised in the book *Rebel Cities* thus go much deeper than the phenomenology of urban revolt. Inspired by Lefebvre's (Anri Lefevr 1974; Henri Lefebvre 1988, 1991) neo-Marxist reflections on urban production, Harvey's ideas have provided a new way of understanding social production of (urban) space. Urban space is no longer an integrated space, but a series of separate spaces and places; it is no longer a geographical or physical notion, but a notion belonging to the fields of sociology and human geography; it is no longer *topos* but *heterotopias*. Such variety of socially, politically and economically produced spaces (different from Foucault's *heterotopias*), boundaries and places generates the dynamics of urban life, but due to its deeply stratified nature it also generates the dynamics of conflicts and rebellion. In the subheading of Harvey's book it is already indicated that *Rebel Cities* is bounded by Lefebvrian key concepts: *Right to the City* and *Urban Revolution*¹. But despite the boundaries set by Lefebvre, Harvey went even further. Therefore, the interest in the issues of spaces, places and boundaries within modern geography and sociology will never be the same after Harvey's provocative *redirection* (Edward W. Soja 1989) of (what used to be) classic understanding of space - towards a social and symbolic context of shaping and production of space. Although Harvey's ideas matured at the peak of neo-Marxist theory out of Europe, their cognitive consequences cannot be confined within the boundaries of their initial creation. Therefore, it was not hard for

¹ This is a famous book *Right to the City* (*Le Droit a la ville*), published in 1967 for the centennial celebration of the first edition of the first volume of *Capital* and the book *Urban Revolution*.

Harvey to integrate in his theory Durkheimian legacy, and later Bourdieu's understanding that different societies in different eras produce "qualitatively different concepts of space and time" (Harvey 1990; Pjer Burdije 1999). However, Harvey, just like Lefebvre, understands (social) space as something that has a highly ideological and political dimension - space actually is an ideological and political product, within which social relations exist as product relations (Lefebvre 2009). Harvey splendidly proves this using an example of ideological constructions of space during the Paris Commune (Harvey 2012) by destroying the Vendôme column as a symbol of Haussmann's new fragmented and segregated urbanistic concept - which was used as a specialised form of hierarchical political and social order - the Communards tried to construct an alternative social order. This example can serve as a much broader and deeper matrix in understanding urban space ideology, in the same way as proposed by Edward Said, referring to a broader cultural context, in his book *Orientalism*. In fact, Harvey points out that the internal historical contradiction of capitalism lies in the ideological destruction of spatial barriers or in "time-space compression" (Harvey 1990), and this contradiction is manifested by drawing new boundaries which produce new barriers and new spaces. In this sense, capitalism not only reshapes the already existing spaces which have been socially and economically as well as politically produced (through urbanistic strategies which are always a mixture of ideology and the market) - capitalism also conquers new, still unshaped spaces which did not use to have the boundaries, zones, land, defined places or hierarchies: "land markets thus mediate space in the same way that finance markets mediate time" (Eric Sheppard 2006). This means that the internal contradiction that creates the dynamics of tension in capitalism is only temporarily overcome by new geographic expansions and conquests of space and territory, through which the market logic of capitalism is imposed. In this way, space is socially produced by the rules of the game created by those who have that space at their disposal - those who have the power. The Paris Commune, as a model, can still be referred to as a matrix of rebellion against the monopolistic production of urban space produced only for the needs of the governing class and their capital. The right to the city is in this way denied to all those living in it, as the city belongs to all the people living in it. Harvey stresses, quoting Lefebvre, that the lesson drawn from the Paris Commune is that revolutionary movements almost always have an urban dimension (Harvey 2012). Hence, we should not be surprised in the least by increasingly rebellious European and global cities, since the matrix of their economic, ideological and social production has not changed significantly since the time of the Paris Commune - it has only become more radical in its neoliberal form. As stated by the author: "urbanization has always been, therefore, a class phenomenon of some sort, since surpluses have been extracted from somewhere and from somebody, while control over the use of the surplus typically lies in the hands of a few" (Harvey 2012). Harvey recognises the matrix used for this most radical urbanisation of Paris (when Bonaparte made Haussmann the main city planner in 1853) also in other more recent examples of urbanisation, like the one launched in the USA during 1940s as urban renewal, or those taking place throughout the world, particularly in Chinese, South American and Asian cities. People who control capital and political instruments for urbanisation today face the same problem

which Haussmann encountered long ago. His mission was to help solve the problem of capital surplus and unemployment through urbanisation. Today we have the same situation. Haussmann's reconstruction of Paris absorbed enormous amounts of labour and capital, and "coupled with authoritarian suppression of the aspirations of the Parisian labor force, was a primary vehicle of social stabilization". Is today's urbanistic strategy significantly different from the one used in the 19th century? Certainly, there are no considerable differences. Let's observe our contemporary conjuncture. Global capitalism in its neoliberal form first started producing a series of consecutive regional crises and crashes (eastern and south-eastern Asia 1997-98, Russia 1998, Argentina 2001, etc.), which culminated in the global crises in 2008. Harvey poses the following question: what has been the role of urbanisation in our recent history? Harvey reports that in the USA, until 2008, the real estate market was one of the key stabilisers of the economy, since the dynamics of this market could absorb a large surplus of capital directly through new urbanistic projects, gentrification, residential buildings in suburbs, as well as new business facilities construction. This urban expansion lasted for a number of decades and was encouraged by inflation of the prices of residential facilities and the concept of refinancing mortgage loans at minimal interest rates. Since urbanisation (together with global capital and international financial markets) became global, this matrix, primarily tested in the USA, quickly spread to the rest of the world: from Ireland and Spain to China and south-eastern Asia. In this respect China represents a particularly interesting case. Namely, during a period of twenty years China became one of the epicentres of urbanisation, which at that time became truly global. This was achieved primarily through intensive global integration of financial markets, flexibility strategy and the policy to finance urbanistic projects from deficits throughout the world: from Dubai to Sao Paulo, from Madrid to Mumbai, all the way to Hong Kong and London. Should we be surprised then by the fact that the crisis, initially caused by the collapse of the real estate market in the USA, spread throughout the world like a fluid? Should we be surprised that urbanisation, capital and the crisis are interconnected? Should we be surprised that urban rebellions today spread from one city to another, from one continent to another?

But there is another important question on which Harvey insists, quoting Lefebvre: what is produced by urbanisation today? Can we still say that urbanisation produces cities? Is the very title of Harvey's book sustainable? Do cities today still exist and does urbanisation still produce them or something else? These questions also refer to the central thesis of the book, and that is *the right to the city*. Harvey introduces the readers to these issues at the beginning of the book, and his conclusions will surprise all those who still believe that today's urban civilisation represents a historical continuity of the thousands of years old phenomenon, which we still - out of the habit - call the city. Harvey and Lefebvre's conclusions are clear: the historical city has already been transformed. The city is dead even for those who would desperately wish to understand it... (Lefebvre 2008). *To claim the right to the city is, in effect, to claim a right to something that no longer exists* (Harvey 2012). But this abrupt interruption of the continuity of the historical city has its causes and its history. Like Lefebvre and Mumford, Harvey also claims that the traditional or historic city has been *killed* under the assault of aggressive capitalistic development. The city

has become a victim of the unceasing need to dispose with the excessively accumulated capital in endless and explosive urban growth, with no regard to social, ecological or political consequences. If the city - in terms of the historical city - no longer exists, it does not mean that there is no urbanity. The urbanity which is a product of capitalism, however, has radically reshaped an important feature of the traditional city: its historically unique, sedimented capacity for integration and social solidarity - the capacity to connect different and opposed elements in a whole, regardless of whether those are social, cultural, language-related, religious or political differences. However, one should not have utopian and romantic ideas about the historical city. It was a space of power, political influences, social and economic differences, rebellions, revolutions, segregations and differentiations. But it always survived due to its capacity to produce universal values, to harmonise and mitigate the differences - to make the order and the dynamics of diversity the matter of rights for all those who live in it. It is the lack of this right - *the right to the city* - that is the key deficit of capitalistic and neoliberal production of urban life. But what is this right supposed to be? Harvey defines this very clearly: "To claim the right to the city in the sense I mean it here is to claim some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and remade, and to do so in a fundamental and radical way". The denial of this right to hundreds of millions of people living in the cities today will necessarily lead to legitimate rebellions, since the right to the city is also the right to rebellion - to *urban revolution*. Although the phenomenology of urban rebellion (either small and sporadic or large and systematic) may create the false idea that urbanity itself generates rebellion and crises, Harvey stresses that urban roots of capitalist crises are the product of the capitalist treatment of space. The right to the city, which increasingly shows its rebellious face, is the revolt against neoliberal project which in the last thirty years has systematically privatised the control concepts - the control of surpluses (values), safety and rights. Since privatisation of control has predominately targeted the cities - through illegitimate privatisation of public urban spaces - fighting for the right to the city as a common space will take place in the streets and on the squares of those cities: it will be fighting for the voice of the deprived. Rebellious right to the city thus is the revolt against the *predatory urban practices* that have been created through urbanisation of capital and the ideology which promises the dominance of the capitalist class over urban processes. This dominance, however, does not refer only to controlling the production of urban space and privatisation of public goods, i.e. public urban spaces. Neoliberal capital, together with neoliberal state apparatus, realises *bio-political* type of power over the entire population of the cities controlling "their lifestyles as well as their labor power, their cultural and political values as well as their mental conceptions of the world". What is happening today with these cities captured in the traps of neoliberal capitalism is actually a Foucauldian scenario of *bio-politics* and *panopticon*, since the apparatuses used for implementing predatory urban practices are used for disciplining, controlling, supervising and punishing.

David Harvey started his book *Rebel Cities* with Lefebvre and Park's ideas. This review ends with one of Park's ideas: "The city is man's most consistent and on the whole, his most successful attempt to remake the world he lives in more after his

heart's desire. But, if the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself". The right to the city discussed by Harvey in his book is an opportunity for the city, as a historically unique human creation, to once again become the place of coexistence and collective decision-making about this coexistence. This is the right to change and conceptualise the city in accordance with our deepest wishes, says Harvey.

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