

David Harvey: “We have to call off this capitalist urbanization dynamic”

Por Gerhard Dilger · 31/10/2015

David Harvey is celebrating his 80th birthday today. This is a perfect occasion for publishing excerpts of a collective conversation which took place in the São Paulo office of Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, in June 2015. The British geographer takes us on a tour d’horizon of “movements creating alternative spaces in which an anti-austerity politics can be articulated. These new ways of provisioning housing or education can be constructive and very progressive”. Happy Birthday!

Edited by Gerhard Dilger*

Harvey inside Welcome, Professor Harvey! We picked you up at the hotel and talked a little bit about the work we are doing here. For twelve years we have been supporting some of the social movements in the region – in Brazil mainly the Rural Landless Workers’ Movement (MST).

In the other four countries where we are active, many our [partners](#) have been working with rural groups as well – with communities defending themselves against mining and other megaprojects, people fighting against agribusiness and all that comes with it, the soy model in Argentina, in Paraguay, in parts of Brazil as well, even in Uruguay, mining in Chile... We also support indigenous groups and some of their allies like the Indigenist Missionary Council (CIMI) here in Brazil, left-wing Catholics who are kind of the logistical backbone of the indigenous movement

here, or the Mapuche in Chile and Argentina who are defending themselves against the extractivist aggression of national and international companies...

Another line of work of the regional office here is dealing with urban subjects and urban problems. We were able to support the Movement for Free Public Transport (MPL) after the demonstrations in June 2013. There's a variety of urban groups we are working with, starting not in 2013, but with more urgency than ever. So it's great to have you here.

The participatory budget in Brazil and the US

[Harvey in SP](#) David Harvey: We actually have a participatory budget movement in New York City now and the movement got quite a bit of attraction. Each counselor in their districts in New York City has a sort of a budget which they can allocate to local projects. So several counselors have used this idea of a participatory budget process to work through how their allocation shall be distributed within their constituency. To some degree it seems that this is being a way of bringing people closer into the political process and into the political decision-making process. And I think counselors are increasingly using it as a way to construct a political constituency for what they want to do. But in doing that, they have to engage in the consultative... So there is some strengthening and this is the argument that is made of democratic procedures.

The problem I think in Porto Alegre and elsewhere was always that the participatory budget was only a very small part of the budget. And you know, I think to a certain point it also was a way for the Workers' Party (PT) to coopt some of the organizations. So I think there are obvious limits to it in terms of what it can do. But my impression in Porto Alegre was that it certainly allowed a certain increase in democratic participation and incorporated marginalized populations into the political process in ways that hadn't been there before. Now, what those

marginalized populations then do politically, is another question. They could end up being right-wing supporters – so it doesn't seem to me that it is necessarily a revolutionary strategy at all.

In the United States, a “revival of left-wing presence at the local municipal level”

But it has progressive momentums as far as I can tell. The members of the New York council this time are much more radical than they were. They tended to be machine politicians, five or ten years ago. Now they are much more likely to be “populist” – not necessarily left-wing, but populist politicians in their neighbourhoods. Whether that's a good thing or a bad thing, I don't know – probably a bit of both. I think it is at least better than what it used to be.

Part of the problem in the Bloomberg administration was that the city council never stood up to him. Some of them tried but that was not a majority. Right now, I think that the majority is in support of Bill De Blasio... there has been a bit of a revitalization of local politics, actually in the United States in general. I don't know if you noticed but both Los Angeles and Seattle have now passed living-wage ordinances which raised the minimum wage in the city from 7,80 to 15 dollars an hour. So these are municipal initiatives which say that anybody doing business in Los Angeles has to pay living wage, and the same is true in Seattle. So there's a bit of a revival of left-wing presence at the local municipal level.

“Attempts to create an alternative governmentality through assembly forms” in Kurdistan

What is very interesting, is of course this notion of Murray Bookchin's about municipal libertarianism, this idea, “We don't challenge the state government head on, what you do is try to create these alternative collective forms of organizing and

decision-making which somehow can address local problems in a constructive way and start to displace a radically inefficient state.”

Now that’s being taken over by the PKK and being administered in the Syrian part of the Kurdish region, in Kobane and Rojava, which is an attempt to revive again the idea of a municipal radicalism and there’s been attempts to implement this even within Turkey itself. So if you got to a city like Diyarbakir, I met this as an attempt to create an alternative governmentality through assembly forms of decision-making and use of resources. The PKK also mandates – there cannot be a single mandate, it always has to be gendered, male and female, so that there are two mayors in Diyarbakir, one woman and one man, and most of those positions are set up that way.

So the radical Kurdish thing which is represented just recently by the HDP and I think it’s very interesting that the HDP did so well in the elections in effect to prevent Erdogan assuming dictatorial powers. Of course, they face a lot of difficulty – most of the people who participate in these activities in Diyarbakir, the authorities throw them in jail, usually for six months. Engaging in terrorist activities – these things are defined by the government as terrorist activities; the PKK is defined as a terrorist organization. They don’t have that constraint in Rojava in Northern Syria, so they are autonomous and there seems to be a kind of confederal, municipal, socialist model being developed in Rojava which is kind of interesting. It has certain parallels with what the Zapatistas did – of not challenging central state power, but of constructing an alternative configuration of power which takes over a lot of decision-making on daily-life questions.

Changing the world by taking power, locally

Initially Occupy was not dominated by anarchist or autonomist sentiments, but their presence was very strong. And that presence meant that they were not

interested in political power in the ordinary sense, they were not interested in the state apparatus as having any relevance whatsoever to what your aims and objectives might be. So there was this insistence that everything has to be horizontal and non-hierarchical and all of that. I've been in fights with them over this for some time and have just now written a piece where I am in a friendly kind of way "attacking" the anarchists. I played with the title of Murray Bookchin's "[Listen, Marxist!](#)" and called the piece "[Listen, Anarchist!](#)" – trying to say that there are some very good things that came out of what the anarchist do but there are also some crucial failures.

We have to be prepared to go beyond what the anarchists do and be prepared to enter into municipal government and all those sorts of things. That is in effect what seems to be happening, the elections in Spain are, I think, very important. But we see this also happening with the kind of socialist representative being elected to the council of Seattle, fighting for the living-wage ordinance and getting it passed. So we are seeing a level of activism which is obviously critical in the state but that hasn't entirely written off state power. And I see some notable figures who I think have come back to the idea that state power is not something to be ignored.

Even Toni Negri now says maybe it is the time to think back and talk about the state and what the possibilities are. So I think the question of these alternative social movements and what their political expression might be is very much on the agenda. We are seeing ways in which it is getting politically expressed through things like what happened in Barcelona or Madrid. I think this is a very exciting and hopeful moment in that sense.

[embedyt] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAxv64m4gsM>[/embedyt]

But there is still very strong sentiment in many organizations of the Left and they want absolutely nothing to do with the state apparatus. So there are all these

students that regard me as a Stalinist because I say that we should not write off negotiating with the state (*laughs*). Actually, “Picture the Homeless” in New York City is trying to set up a community land trust but in order to get a land trust you need to get the land. And the only way they can get the land is with the help of the city council. If you look at the very large community land trust in Canada, in Montreal: It was organized by anarchists, but not by anarchists who were totally about horizontalism. They were anarchists who used the state apparatus and negotiated with the state apparatus to take a big chunk of land right in the center of Montreal and take it out of the market. And now it’s affordable housing for the population.

We should start to use these examples and say we could do that. “Picture the Homeless” has been talking to De Blasio, but he hasn’t decided anything. I’m sure that if he does anything, he will be attacked in the media most horribly but if he agrees and is prepared to help acquire a piece of land upon which there will be affordable housing for homeless people, this again would be a very impressive example of how to proceed. So I think there are signs of this sort of thing happening and I find it very encouraging.

Cities like Los Angeles and Seattle have decided to get out of the austerity politics and create a space which is anti-austerity. And that was the thrust of the Scottish independence movement and of other movements to create alternative spaces in which an anti-austerity politics can be articulated. And these new ways of provisioning housing, education and the like can be constructive and very progressive.

david-harvey-quitChina’s “crazy urbanization project”

What we’ve got right now are some of these totally absurd forms of urbanization, for example in states like Dubai. There is crazy stuff going on. But this is where I

come back to the macroeconomic thing – I mean, the only thing that has kept global capitalism alive over the last years is the urbanization of China. And actually this is the survival of capitalism we are talking about here. If there had not been this huge urbanization project in China and if it had not been accelerated in the way it was after 2007/08, most of Latin America would have been in crisis throughout this whole period. Australia would have been in crisis. Because all of the raw material producers survived on the basis of this crazy urbanization project in China.

China has tripled its debt in relationship to GDP during this whole period, it's hugely indebted, the only difference is that it is not indebted in dollars, it's indebted to itself. So, there's that side of it, and of course the Chinese are terribly frightened of labour unrest and so this has been a labour absorption project which has also absorbed a great deal of surplus capital, so all of that is in the mix, it's not simply the environmental question. This contradiction really is coming to an end, the growth dynamic of capitalism and what capitalism is about in terms of compounding growth forever. And the environmental consequences – there were these statistics that China has consumed more cement in the last five years than the US consumed over the last century. Covering the country with cement doesn't seem to me a good ecological idea...

Insane commuting in Istanbul

The urban question is crucial, but it is through more radical forms of urbanization that I think we are going to actually solve some of these problems. Including of course a lot more emphasis upon urban agricultural configurations and the like. I am old enough to remember World War II, and when I was young my father and I spent a lot of time cultivating land. Actually, something like 15% of the food supply in Britain was provided by what was called “dig for victory” campaign where

people were growing stuff in their backyards. You could certainly revive that sort of activity. There are some community gardens and things like this which I don't really work on...

The other thing is of course the increasing separation between residential opportunities and work opportunities. I mean, a limited amount of commuting is a good idea, but it seems to me that commuting right now got crazy. Particularly given the way the land market works in such a way as to expel low income populations to low-value land which is usually land that is not accessible to job opportunities. And here again, some public policies are insane.

In Istanbul, I visited a place where people who had been displaced from the centre of Istanbul lived – which was not inferior housing, it was actually rather good quality housing. These people have a very good deal, they have to pay a certain amount of money per month, and after 15 years, they then become owners. The government is very proud of it. The trouble is, it is 55 kilometers out of the centre of Istanbul. It's in a beautiful rural area, but with absolutely no job opportunities. So people can't make their payments, become homeless and drift back into the centre of Istanbul.

And when the minister is being challenged, why they built the houses out there, he says “well, I'm not in charge of jobs, I'm just in charge of housing”. So I think again, what you're looking at is a response to a situation in which high-valued land is separating people from job opportunities. And the land and property market is working in such a way as to create these disparities with long commutes which again takes energy, takes also psychic and personal energy. So this is the irrational side of urbanization which capital is producing by the dynamic of capital accumulation in the city.

“This cannot continue in this way”

The dynamic of capital accumulation as a whole is increasingly dependent on urbanization as one of its major means of productive and profitable activity. Some of that is of course fictitious because you are just raising rents – rent extraction from the city is becoming a much more important source of income for the capitalist class as a whole. So with that capitalist dynamic, focusing on urban development in the way it is and maintaining that urbanization dynamic is absolutely essential to the future of capital accumulation.

We have to call off this capitalist dynamic – this cannot continue in this way. The urban development I see in Brazil over the last 30, 40 years – I came to São Paulo first in the 1970s, but I also was in places like Recife and Salvador – now they are completely taken over with high-rise condominiums and shopping malls. Everybody in Brazil likes to think that Brazil is special – but what's special about that? It's just capitalist, come on (*laughs*). And generically, it's the same thing, it's the automobile and the highways and shopping malls and condominiums, that's it. And if we realize that this has all happened in the last 30, 40 years and think about what will be happening in the next 30, 40 years, imagine what kind of world you'll be living in. It's unimaginable – what we are seeing in China, that's the future.

Capitalism is destroying indigenous societies in Amazonia

We see the spread of capital's ecosystem in certain circumstances, which is disruptive of other ecosystems. I went down into Amazonia, in Ecuador, into the oilfields, and what we see there with the oil exportation and extraction: capital's ecosystem is eating into Amazonia. It then disrupts and pollutes the water supplies and turns them toxic so that the indigenous populations have no way in which they can continue their existence. So the indigenous ecosystem – which is also a distinctive ecosystem – is invaded by the capital's ecosystem which then destroys it. The lifestyle within gets destroyed, and then they get social housing and are put

in these millennial villages which are also ridiculous places where indigenous population is resettled in something that looks like a street of an American suburb.

This is again the concept that every society constructs its own ecosystemic configuration. Indigenous societies also build their own ecosystems – which is not often understood. Often it is understood that indigenous people live in an ecosystem which they have not been managing, but it is very much part of their managerial practices over the last thousands of years and therefore adapted to their way of life. And then the other ecosystem comes in and conflicts with it and destroys its water quality and water supplies and then their ecosystem collapses. They cannot live their life anymore and they then get picked up and taken out and put in some place where they have nothing constructed to do then. Otherwise they don't have their own ecosystem at all. So this is the way I think of it – which is rather different from the more conventional way of thinking about capital being over here and having an impact upon an ecosystem. I say it is ecosystemic, I understand it as ecosystemic.

„The politics of daily life should be central to what we are doing”

[Harvey outside](#) I am convinced that the politics right now is heavily influenced by concerns about the quality of daily life and I think any program should be trying to theorize the problems of daily life against the background of dynamics of capital accumulation, the typical configurations of state power... So I would always want to concentrate on how we deal with the politics which is coming out of the discontents with daily life in the contemporary city. A lot of the municipal elections in Spain have turned on that, and also the uprising in Gezi was about daily life in the city and the lack of democratic consultation etc.

So I think the politics of daily life should be central to what we are doing. This doesn't exclude the examination of labour processes and all the rest of it, but it

seems to me that the Marxist tradition has been far too much focused on production and not on the dynamics of realization. Because value is being realized right now through urbanization, and the people who realize it are not necessarily those who produce it. There is a lot of rent extraction going on in cities by people who haven't produced anything.

We have to deal with that, and part of the problems I have with the Marxist tradition has to do with the reluctance to incorporate that – which goes back to Engels and the housing question. He had some brilliant observations on the housing question but then kind of said all this is secondary to the production side – and it has been treated as secondary ever since. And maybe in Engels' days there was some justification for doing that because the politics of realization was not as great an issue as it currently is. In contemporary China the argument is that the powering of the economy is about 35 per cent by consumers. And probably in Marx's days, the role of consumerism was probably around 30 per cent, but now in the United States it's 70 per cent.

And I have fierce arguments with some Marxist colleagues when I say "How can you treat something as secondary that accounts for 70 per cent of the economy?" I mean, everybody is looking at these measures of consumer sentiment as foundation – why are you saying that is irrelevant? And then they turn to me and say "That's just because you are neo-Keynesian" (*laughs*). Shut up! You know, just because Keynes took some ideas out of Volume Two of "The Capital", now you say that the entire argument of Volume Two is Keynesian – crazy. Marxists are very conservative, incredibly so.

** Collective interview, conducted during the [International Rebel Cities Conference](#), organized by Boitempo Editorial: Ana Rüsche, Camila Moreno, Daniel Santini, Elis Soldatelli, Florencia Puente, Gerhard Dilger, Isabel Loureiro, Marcos de Oliveira, Mariana Fix, Pedro Arantes and Verena Glass. Transcription: Sarah Lempp, photos:*

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