

EDOARDO BORIA

ON THE LEGITIMACY OF THE NEOLIBERAL DISCOURSE AND THE
MATERIAL AND SYMBOLIC DEVICES OF TERRITORIALITY. REFLECTIONS
ON THE RECENT WORK OF DAVID HARVEY

Abstract - The thought of David Harvey has profoundly changed the history of geography, heralding a time that has seen it actively engaged in debate over the great social issues of our times. To his already rich repertoire the author has added a new work in 2014, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, in which he updates his criticism of the system of capital on the basis of events following the crisis, of financial origin, which exploded in the United States in 2007 with the bursting of the speculative bubble in the real estate sector and the corresponding collapse in market values.

This article, while agreeing with the urgency to lay bare the inconsistencies underlying neoliberal logic and to draw critical attention to the dramatic results to which it leads on a social and ecological level, calls into question some developments that the critical reflections of Harvey have undergone over time. In particular, it focuses on the concept of production of space and on the latest interpretations of the ideas of Harvey regarding the question of territoriality.

Lastly, the figure of this scholar is framed in the geographic landscape of today, which relegates him to a marginal position due to a lack of being in tune with dominant scientific paradigms.

Keywords: Harvey, neoliberalism, production of space, territoriality, marxist geography, capitalism

Production of Space

The merits of the thought of David Harvey lie not only in the originality of the content brilliantly offered through a rich production which has earned recognition worthy of a great intellectual of our times. These merits indeed also concern the lessons of civic engagement that Harvey has promoted,

with the ambition to respond to complex problems and with the imagination to consider radical solutions in response to the crisis of the system.

This paper, however, will not address the merits of David Harvey, but rather with a critical spirit, address some points that emerge from a developmental reading of his thinking and that query the geography of the major social issues of our times.

The first, particularly problematic, aspect regards the concept of space production, a theme dear to Harvey that comes from the inspiration of Henri Lefebvre (1974), helping to make him known to the English-speaking public. In the current formulation of geographic space it is fundamentally a social space constantly produced and reproduced by the relationships and dynamics of power. The dominion of space in this perspective, therefore, constitutes a hegemonic expression while territory is treated as a commodity, entirely affordable and exchangeable as in a free market.

Although Lefebvre and Harvey are attracted to urban contexts, which represent an exemplary case of space production, the two are distinguished by the horizon of analyses: the first extends to the multiple forms of diffusion and diversification of space production, also comprising service activities and those oriented to the consumer, while the second especially in his later works, focuses on material forms connected to productive activities.

The first report carried out on the concept of space production dates back to Harvey in *The Limits to Capital* of 1982. There the noted explanation of the ways in which the capitalist system utilises territory was formulated: it uses it during its periodic crises of over-accumulation by allowing the acceptance of those investments in infrastructure useful to profitably dispose of excess capital. In short, they build bridges, buildings, roads etc. to absorb the surplus.

In his latest book, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* of 2014, Harvey returns to the subject, above all in the chapter on disparate geographical developments and space production, where he confirms that capital exploits geographical divides and provides reasoned considerations with a wealth of empirical evidence: for example, relatively large companies that relocate where the cost of labour is lower or tend to concentrate their offices in economic, financial and political centres.

However, these geographical divides are destined to fade in the long term as capital moves, abandoning one area and settling in a more profitable other. Also in this regard Harvey offers many examples: the centralisation of decision makers beyond a certain limit lowers the quality of life in that place and raises the costs (the most recurrent example being New York, where Harvey resides); cheap labour costs attract businesses initially, but in the long term they tend to rise as workers organise themselves, prices of land and real estate go up and so on etc.

So, the very nature of the capitalist mechanism would lie a twofold contrasting push: to deepen geographical divides and exploit cost differentials but also to encourage the balance between those

same differentials. Harvey writes, “The construction of a geographic landscape favourable to the accumulation of capital in a period of time becomes, in short, an obstacle to the accumulation in the next” (2014, p.158).

This phenomenon is of great interest to a geographer because in times of transition, that is when you reconfigure a new landscape, “shifts of power in the forces that produce the geographical landscape of capital occur” (*ibidem*, pp.154-155). Of course the interesting thing is not in easily observable geographical divides themselves, but the dynamics and factors which trigger them. On these factors Harvey questions and explains convincingly how the capital in the production of material elements acts to favour the process of accumulation and maximisation of profit, but does not consider so importantly asking whether and how capital operates on the elements of space production. In the entire chapter on geographical contradiction (the eleventh) there is not a single word devoted to symbolic elements. Interest is exclusively reserved for systems of reification that operate in the production of space while disregarding the systems of symbolisation.

The significant consequence for geography of this way of thinking is that the symbolic space does not have much value. Yet every social transformation entails and demands a hegemony even in the symbolic domain of territoriality. Without going back to Durkheim, who already considered space as a social category subject to the changes of history, many authors have dealt with this argument.¹ Among these authors figure Harvey himself, but he appears to have forgotten them in his last work. Harvey seems to have forgotten today a thing of which he himself has persuaded many, and that is “every project of transformation of societal transformation has to decisively face the complex problem of the transformation of concepts and practices of space and time” (1997, p.268). This objective leads to the conclusion that “power in the field of representations may end up being as important as the power of the material aspect of spatial organisation itself” (*ibidem*, p.286).

Neglecting such considerations is not without major consequences, especially if, as Harvey intends to do, one moves in a direction of locked and active dispute to the logic of capital. Indeed, the above quotations remind us that representations of reality inevitably influence practices, and then every reaction to the logic imposed by the capitalist model and its consequences must intervene, even before the practices, on the representations. This would be the decisive level for reterritorialising the world.

There would be then, in the last work of Harvey, an afterthought induced perhaps by a narrow and mechanical adoption of the materialist perspective, which ends up providing technical explanations

¹ For example Carl Schmitt (2006, p.58-59): “Every great historical transformation almost always involves a change of the image space. This is the true essence of the great political, economic and cultural that one then realises”.

With other objectives but attributable to the same basic considerations is the thought of Angelo Turco (2010, p.111): “The most universal of transformative practices concerns the symbolic domain: the human order is given to the world not only and not so much thanks to the alteration of its material, but primarily – and if we adopt a historical perspective we would say above all – thanks to intellectual manipulation”.

preventing him from grasping the decisive factor given by the importance of cognitive elements, perceptive and symbols of production space. The attention that Harvey turns to the material forms through which the rule of capital manifests does not correspond to the similar attention to symbolic forms through which the domination of capital is building its own speech and narratives. In other words, of the three dimensions – symbolic, material and organisational – through which territorialisation unfolds (Turco, 2010), he is not interested in the first. The material dimension is certainly there, the organisational is there in abundance, but the symbolic remains only hinted at. Why? Yet it is clear that capitalism needs continuous legitimation to hide its contradictions, those contradictions that Harvey highlights so well. Here, Harvey is not interested in the aestheticisation of capitalist discourse, which also proves to be successful if he can disguise all the contradictions that it contains within itself so well.

The choice of Harvey to favour the material processes over the symbolic ones is justified by the belief that they are the last to give substance to social conceptions of space (and also of time). That is, it would only be from material processes that human communities develop their spatiality, and their sense of space. Interpretation of social space is thus driven by what happens in the space of material production, or what is specifically related to material production. In this perspective, the changes in the productive sphere of society determine the changes in the cultural sphere. The logic of capital determines cultural life. It is evidence that Harvey provides that comes from the commercialisation of culture: the art and the quality of an artist or an object are increasingly valued in monetary terms. This would constitute a proof of the victory of the logic of capital, which measures everything in terms of exchange value. It is therefore the economic structure that naturalises all, tirelessly producing and reproducing the social order and legitimising itself.

However, an analysis wholly concentrated on the sphere material, from which one descends in the emotional sphere automatically and without problems, does not take into account the role of visual culture, which mediates between the two spheres. The production of sense, which then triggers perceptions, feelings and behaviour, is not only given by the material sphere, but by complex relationships with the symbolic universe of places and with the symbolic dimension of territoriality.

In the recovery of the ability to rethink themselves *in* the place there is an important instrument of resistance to neo-liberal policies. Harvey himself explicitly admits this when he writes that the only hope of resisting for anti-capitalism is to recover the local dimension: “Anti-capitalist movements must abandon every idea of regional equality and of convergence toward some theory of socialist harmony. These are recipes for an unacceptable and unattainable global monotony. Anti-capitalist movements must liberate and coordinate their dynamics of uneven geographical development, the production of

emancipatory spaces of difference, to reinvent and explore alternatives to regional and creative capital” (2014, pp.165-166).

Every form of anti-capitalist resistance, every action of protest in the capitalist system must necessarily, therefore, for Harvey adapt to the local context and avoid falling into the universalistic trap. Assuming a local point of view to fight a force of universal strategies. This point of attention to the local context is therefore present in Harvey in terms of general guidelines on the strategy of struggle, but does not cover the practices of resistance due to disinterest toward the symbolic dimension of territoriality.

The fact that neoliberal policies work on the removal of identity, on the exclusion of social groups, on geographical marginalisation (all processes easily visible in suburban areas), should instead suggest working on symbolisation and on memory of places to counteract neo-liberal policies on that strategic ground that is territorialisation. The aggressiveness of neoliberalism is seen precisely in the incessant redesign – first symbolic and then material – of spaces of community.

The first right violated by neoliberalism, the most violent act that commits to the detriment of the community is the expropriation of the right to choose one’s territoriality. The community today faces a territorialisation which is determined from the outside. As citizens of the colonies saw their places reterritorialised by an outside actor (the colonialist), so today all the world suffers from the violent practices of colonisation by capital. So is expressed the dominion of capital. But Harvey, unexpectedly, apparently underestimates the issue of territoriality. He does so just at the stage at which it appears clear that if one does not recover the capacity of individuals and of the community to feel themselves as architects in the historical life of places one cannot effectively enable any practice, neither a kind of memorial nor a type of planning.

In the absence of effective counter-narrative capitalism has an easy game because it requires a description of the world to conform to its own interests, that is able to communicate and transmit territory in line with its universalist ideology. Similarly on this point Harvey, while recognising its importance (*ibidem*, p.107), does not consider it worth looking into. Instead it seems dangerous to me to ignore this discursive dimension because the hegemony of capital is also expressed through the hegemony of representations, motivated by the assumption that exercising power over territory means not only to physically control it but also to be able to represent it in the circuit of communication in a way which conforms to its interests.

Instead the Marxist perspective leads Harvey to concentrate on material production, leaving discursive production in the background. Already years ago Jean Baudrillard (1987) and even earlier Guy Debord (1967) warned of the power of advertising, which does not promote individual products anymore but aims to define tastes and spread values. Today their reflections on the strategic value of the discursive dimension seem to me not only still valid, but even more valuable than before. The latest work of

Harvey instead liquidates all reasoning on regulatory devices of social life to the conflict of means of production. Foucault disappears, De Certeau disappears. Governmentality becomes mechanical, depleted within material practices of power; the symbolic and discursive dimension of governmentality is effectively excluded.

However, if everything is explained in purely materialistic terms of capitalist exploitation I doubt that one can understand, much less to combat, some conflicts of our time in which the battle essentially takes place on the field of culture; for example, it would be quite complicated to oppose the drift towards xenophobia and racism of recent years with the theoretical paraphernalia of Harvey, that feeds above all on populism and intellectual misery rather than material hardship. A similar reasoning could be brought to gender discrimination.

In this perspective it loses effectiveness and also that analytic category that is invaluable in the construction of Harvey, and that is class. For Harvey class division remains the fundamental explanation of social conflicts. But are we so sure that the dynamics and practices of the domination of a social group over another today unfold through the divisions of class, that Harvey faithfully interprets in terms of ownership of the means of production? In a fluid society where identities tend to continuously fragment, intersect, crossover and overlap, to consider class as the most representative category of our times is the most useful anti-capitalist action could be a stretch, while instead it could be more fruitful to think of social gatherings constructed around alternative criteria to those based on relations of production.

Harvey and geography

In his stubborn adherence to the materialist perspective and in his confidence toward the historicist type of great narrative structure, Harvey confirms himself deeply as anti-postmodern. He lives with evident irritation at this turning point in the social sciences, because from his point of view the postmodern refusal of ideologies impedes constructive thinking about the reality of the political economy, of inequality and of discrimination.

In this his attitude is nonconformist. Harvey is not interested in decisive innovations that have profoundly marked geographic studies in recent years: deconstructionism, the spatial turn, the cultural and post or neo phenomenological change have all changed the paradigm of scientific discipline, affecting the ways of thinking and working of many geographers, but Harvey does not care. Is this good? Is this good, that is, to distance himself from his colleagues, who he cites increasingly rarely, not

recognising himself anymore in the family album and putting himself in sharp contrast to mainstream geographers of today?

The relevance of the question is not in the demand for a specific discipline in the current context of social sciences devoted to the exchange of experiences between different sectors (while recognising that David Harvey has for years represented a living advertisement for geography, able to make hermeneutical potential and sensitivity to social issues known abroad). Rather, questioning the relationship between Harvey and geography is a useful pretext to reflect on the direction that geography has taken in recent years.

In the beginning Harvey was greatly concerned by the conceptualisation of territory. In this last work, such speculative tension seems decisively weakened. Today Harvey makes accessory use of the category 'territory'. In effect, to develop his own vision of the world, Harvey does not need territory and therefore does not need geography, and in fact it is not present in this last book. A clear judgment is not mitigated by the fact that an entire chapter of that book is dedicated to the contradiction between capital and nature, since in those pages it refers exclusively to the question of the environment, which is a matter of enormous importance it fundamentally represents the only true remaining social conflict (indeed more divisive than the conflict on the theme of the work), but does not foresee any conceptual effort on territory. Therefore, even if there is some reference to territory in the latter book, it is not treated as a problematic given. On territory some of the contradictions of capitalism are unloaded, but it is only the background scenery.

The Harvey of today is no longer that of *Social Justice and the City* (1973), and neither that of the right to the city, where geography was both produced by capitalism and an essential part of it. Space was produced by the practices of capital but this same spatial reality, once produced, came to exercise limits to the free flow of capital, influencing decisions. They were the social effects of spatiality. An active spatiality. Now, instead, there is not only one reflection on cultural sense, relative and contingent on human spatiality. Today Harvey ceases to look at historical processes also as spatial processes. Exactly as his mentor Karl Marx did a century and a half ago. Harvey stops being a Marxist geographer to, apparently, become a pure Marxist.

Why does Harvey speak less and less of territory? I do not believe that it is a change of interests. If this were so it would not be something to worry about. Perhaps instead, unfortunately, there is a veiled truth that would be highly worrying for geographers: if they want to study the underlying mechanisms of this society – how does Harvey – territory is no longer a determining factor because financial capitalism has overturned the instrumental function to the process of capitalist accumulation.

The global economy based on the capitalist system connects places by needs that are universal and therefore indifferent to their specificity. Perhaps Harvey is not interested in territory anymore because

he no longer sees any spatial strategy in hyperfinancialised capitalism: territorial infrastructure is no longer the base of the profitability of economic activity, and therefore territory loses interest because it no longer explains the distribution of wealth and power. The 'spatial solution' that only a few years ago he glimpsed as an outlet for over-accumulation and the crisis of capitalism (the investments in infrastructure which have been spoken of at the beginning) is today outdated because over-accumulation is vented in new financial solutions – speculative instruments invented by financial turbo-capitalism.

Putting financial capitalism at the roots of deterritorialisation leads Harvey to denying the value of territory and therefore also of geography, that is the performative capacity to rethink territory. Excluding that territory still has a relevance in economic processes, reasoning automatically weakens the ability of the community to preserve its own effective territorial initiative. Geographical indifference imposed by capital would, therefore, downgrade territory, with the consequence of downgrading geography. The analysis of Harvey, therefore, should be a cause of concern to geographers.

Harvey who in the past has recognised and demonstrated the centrality of places when he spoke of the crisis of modernity and of the city, today does not recognise it as more central. When he spoke of the crisis of modernity he identified the specificity of places as a factor in the diversification of the phenomenon: the crisis of modernity of which he speaks in the famous book of the same name tells us that he had different accents in Paris or in New York, and demonstrates to us the importance of an analysis that takes into account the places. In this last book the places are essentially neutral: they are not a factor but only an inert manifestation, a purely passive expression of the phenomenon.

There is only one aspect in which places regain their specificity and heterogeneity: in the proposal stage, where Harvey elaborates his recipe. There he says that the anti-capitalist action can only be effective if it is emancipated from a vision of universal socialism and recovers the potential of places; namely if the resistance is localised, declined in a different way from place to place. If, that is, it assumes forms appropriate to the local context. It is from there, the places, that an action of resistance to the hegemony of capital can launch its own challenge. In stressing the exploitation of places aside from capital, as well as people, Harvey reveals in his work where there is less geography in the canonical sense, its original geographic extraction. His proposal comes in part from the reaction of the geographer who rebels against the annihilation of places. But then prevails the strength of the ideal and the passion of the militant with the certainty of one day seeing the subversion of order. Not by chance the conclusions are titled *The promise of revolutionary humanism*, as if to indicate an inescapable destiny, a teleological vision of history today outside of current scientific paradigms.

For those, like me, who are not fully convinced either by the analysis of Harvey or his ultimate formula, this unconventionality that protects it from the fashions of the moment represents the greatest value: it

is the value of freedom of thought, of intellectual autonomy, the ethical value of research that does not merely convey concepts (or worse, information) but enters the game by measuring itself by strong questions. Harvey feels his responsibility as an intellectual critic. His is a great, civic education that addresses, in general, every citizen but, in particular, recalls intellectuals to their responsibilities.

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