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〈書評〉

David Harvey***Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution***

Verso, 2012

Meriç Kırmızı

In *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (2012), geographer David Harvey analyzes both theoretical and practical aspects of urban social movements (USMs) and their potential as starting points for a much wider anti-capitalist struggle. The book is organized into two parts entitled, *The Right to the City* and *Rebel Cities*. In the four sections of the first part, Harvey gives a theoretical introduction to understanding the pressing necessity for urban-based anti-capitalist struggles against the ongoing barbaric, morally wrong, and exposed system, which is “incapable of any response other than repression,” and hence is, “everywhere on the defensive”¹⁾. In the three sections of the second part, he analyzes recent cases from the Anglo-Saxon world.

Harvey asks at several points, why the city is the starting point or a way-station on the road to a much broader revolution. What is special in the capitalist urbanization experience that renders urban struggles fundamental to anti-capitalist politics? His answer lies at first in how capitalism depends on urbanization to absorb its surplus production and the exploitative mechanism behind this process. Secondly, because of the changing socio-economic structure since the 1980s, with deindustrialization and the widespread urbanization of populations all around the world, Harvey asks: “How else and where else can we come together to articulate our collective crises and demands?”²⁾. Thirdly, Harvey argues that political power also develops most of the time an urbanized approach to social and class warfare by reorganizing urban infrastructure and life so as to control the resisting urban populations, such as in Haussmann's Paris.

In the third section of the first part entitled, *The Creation of the Urban Commons*, Harvey revisits the urban issues intensified in the neoliberal urban policy era in terms of Garrett Hardin's theory of the tragedy of the commons, which defines a social dilemma, where short-term individual rational behavior causes long-term harm to self, others, and the environment. Admitting that the commons problem is always contradictory and contested, Harvey formulates the critical question of whose common interests we seek to protect and how. Next, in the fourth section entitled *The Art of Rent*, the focus is on the area of culture, for example the historical culture of a city like Barcelona, as another form of commons by pointing out its increasing commoditization as a means for monopoly rent to reduce the potential for cultural interventions to become weapons of class

struggle.

In the second part, Harvey reads the urban uprising in London and Occupy Wall Street (#OWS) protests in 2011 through the lenses of the potentialities of such urban social movements for realizing demands for the right to the city. Delving into the background of the appearances of the London uprising, Harvey finds social issues like racism, bad policing, social deprivation, and mass unemployment. The new normal or the order of the day is a “political economy of mass dispossession, of predatory practices to the point of daylight robbery”³⁾ to which we could add daylight terrorism of citizens by the state. Harvey considers #OWS to be an attempt to turn public space into a *political commons* - the latter has to be collective and non-commodified, reminiscent of a Habermasian public sphere. Setting down our task as contemplation of the future outlines of an alternative city and an alternative political-economic system, he argues that these movements should strive to reach out to the 99%, composed not only of the workers, but also students, immigrants, the underemployed, the alienated, the discontented, and so on – a re-conceptualized proletariat. After achieving in this way, a necessary generality, the alternatives should tackle the issues of: anti-wealth rather than anti-poverty, ecology, and capitalist growth, without mimicking their capitalist competitors and focusing solely on production at the expense of money and commodity capital.

About the critics directed at *Rebel Cities* and Harvey's work in general, these can be summarized into the following: 1) Generalizability of and connections between particular cases of rebel cities 2) Omission of some valuable historical examples of urban struggles 3) Actualization of alternatives both in terms of practicability of ideas such as the right to the city, commons or communing, and sustainability of existing social movements 4) Desirability of the suggested alternative 5) Harvey's prioritization of material change over an awareness and dissent towards the capitalist city 6) Harvey having never actually problematized the state. I argue that one can find answers in this book at least to the third and last critics from this list. In the Preface, Harvey refers to Lefebvre's *right to the city*, as an empty signifier, that is, what matters is not right to the city as a concept in itself, but the meaning it gains when it is made into a demand or object of struggle by the actual producers of urban life as they pursue making “the city more after their own heart's desire”⁴⁾. Regarding the state issue, Harvey writes: "The question of state, and in particular what kind of state (or non-capitalist equivalent), cannot be avoided even in the midst of immense contemporary skepticism, on both the left and the right of the political spectrum, of the viability or desirability of such a form of institutionalization”⁵⁾. For Harvey, the organizational structure is an inevitable question for any alternative, because simply smashing the state as leftists aimed to do after the collapse of the communist bloc, does not guarantee a less barbaric society.

With so many urban social movements occurring everywhere around the world, this is a good time to read *Rebel Cities*, especially for those, who are not satisfied with only cultural explanations to socio-spatial issues. I agree with Marinković's argument that “(···) one cannot read Harvey's discussions about the cities without understanding his critique of neoliberal capitalism (···)”⁶⁾. Harvey's theories render the events in the streets

much more comprehensible, because he provides their wider political-economic context. Only with the help of social theories that underline the connections between the singular events, are we able to understand that “The problem is systemic, not individual”⁷⁾. Despite the severity of the situation, Harvey finds some “glimmers of hope and light around the world”⁸⁾ from the *indignados* of Spain and Greece, to the developments in Latin America, to peasant movements in Asia, and now, Turkey, after the #Occupy Gezi Protests. Harvey continuously asks, “how can we begin all over again?” and “which direction should we take?” because he believes that to reach the right answers, we first need to ask the right questions, which are very different from the meaningless or even non-existent questions discussed by capital-sponsored think tanks, corporate-funded university studies, and the media. He also provides some valuable insights and clues to the right answers, for which “only time will tell”, but for Harvey, “the time is now”⁹⁾.

Notes

1) Harvey, p. 164.

2) Ibid, p. xvii.

3) Ibid, p. 156.

4) Ibid, p. xvi.

5) Ibid, p. 153.

6) Marinković, D. (2013). Rev. of Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution, by David Harvey. *Panoeconomicus* 5, p. 699.

7) Harvey, p. 160.

8) Ibid, p. 157.

9) Ibid, p. 164.

