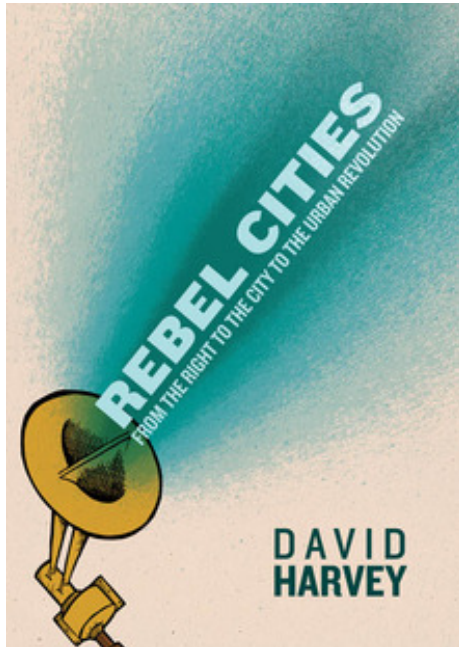


Review: David Harvey, *Rebel Cities : From the Right to the City to Urban Revolution*

Marnie Holborow



David Harvey, *Rebel Cities : From the Right to the City to Urban Revolution*, Verso 2012, €16.00

More than one hundred cities have passed the one million mark in the last twenty years. Small villages like Shenzhen in China have become huge metropolises of 6-10 million people. Huge infrastructural projects, dams and highways, are churning up the countryside. Vast shopping malls, science parks, underwater hotels, airports, container ports, gated communities and golf courses dot the landscapes of our world. In Santiago in Chile, in Mumbai, in Johannesburg in Seoul but also in New York, in London, Los Angeles, in Spain and in Ireland, there has been a building boom for the rich. But the other side of this massive urban expansion is a planet of slums: huge communities of makeshift urban shacks with no proper water supply or sanitation, thou-

sands scavenging for food from the rubbish dumped by the cities, thousands being daily bulldozed out of where they lived. In Europe and the US, the homeless beg on the streets, soup kitchens abound, townspeople are returning to villages for food, mortgage holders live in fear of repossessions, and unemployment and poverty stalk the housing estates and flats of the suburbs. Perhaps never have cities become so sharply socially divided and so fragmented.

Underdevelopment in a system of plenty has long been a feature of Irish cities. Towns set to expand in the eighteenth century withered under British rule, or else wasted away as garrison enclaves. Dublin grew not as an industrial centre, following Manchester, Berlin or Chicago, but with deindustrialisation and thousands of squalid slums. Industrial Belfast fared little better, its urban development stunted and scarred by sectarianism. Later, in Dublin and Cork, corrupt building practices and recession left a trail of destruction and dereliction, right up to the 1990's. Now today, as thousands of ghost estates stand idle and office carcasses blot the skyline, Irish cities stand as proof, once again, of class division and the excesses of speculation and profiteering.

Rebel Cities: From Right to the City to Urban Revolution by American marxist, David Harvey fills in the picture behind this urban chaos. He shows how capital has used urban development for its own ends and how neoliberal politics and the present crisis, have led to 'ever greater polarisation in the distribution of wealth and power being indelibly etched into the spatial forms of our cities'.

Harvey argues that cities play a crucial role for capital accumulation as they absorb capital and labour surpluses. But the result of this anarchic expansion is impoverishment and alienation for the vast majority of city dwellers.

Geographer at the City University of New York, Harvey, with his easy style, captures the spirit and breadth of marxist analysis. His explanations of the workings of capital already laid out in his previous book *The Enigma of Capital* - manages to fuse, in true dialectical fashion, the general laws of motion of capital and their specific manifestations in contemporary capitalism. His book also provides useful ways into the works of Marx, a technique that he has used with striking effect in his popular guides to reading Capital, and which have probably made Harvey the most effective populariser of Marx alive today.

In *Rebel Cities*, he explains how neoliberal urbanisation has created the conditions for greater exploitation under capitalism. He quotes Marx and Engels's observation in *The Communist Manifesto* that no sooner had workers received their wages than 'they were set upon by the other portions of the bourgeoisie, the landlord, the shopkeeper, the pawnbroker etc' and subjected to further forms of exploitation. Similar predatory urban practices today, he shows, further strip workers of what is rightfully theirs. People are pushed out of their publicly provided rented accommodation by privatisation. Higher prices are slapped on their houses and the areas become 'gentrified', which then forces workers to the outskirts of the city, to suffer poorer services, greater travel costs and, with credit agencies luring them into their web, new forms of debt enslavement. Then, after the economic crash, foreclosures and the fraudulent seizure of property by banks and government take away their right to a house, contributing

further to the huge transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich.

Harvey explains clearly the mechanisms by which property booms, despite the ideology about better urban living, always serve the capitalist class. After the 1848 revolution in France, Paris was rebuilt by Haussmann to absorb surplus capital and labour, on a huge scale, with massive sums invested and the creation of new forms of credit through an expanded banking system. The result, described earlier by Harvey, with vivid cultural and visual imagery, in *Paris :A city of Modernity*, was a vast urban reconfiguration which, amongst other things, served to repress the political movement of the workers of Paris. In *Rebel Cities*, he shows how similar concerns drive the vast projects of urbanisation today.

Urbanisation under capitalism provides a clear example of how different sorts of capital work in tandem. It is commonplace, in the aftermath of the crash, for economists to assume that the finance system is somehow independent from the core of the system, and need only be tweaked or regulated to eliminate its excesses. Harvey shows, with marvellous clarity, how financial speculation in property, a form of fictitious capital, combines with productive capital and how it is inherently bound up with the overall capitalist mode of production.

The capital merry - go - round starts with financial institutions lending to developers, landowners and construction companies to build a suburban development in California, Southern Spain or, say, South Dublin, on the basis that they will make profits both from building houses and selling them. This often involves the very same finance company furnishing both the finance to build and the finance to buy what has been built. Capital thus seems to have managed to do the impossible:

to control both supply and demand and thereby to have found a way of getting out of the cycle of economic crises.

However, as Harvey explains, this supply and demand relationship is lop-sided because of the time lags between building and selling can be very long compared to other commodities produced and sold. Public policy gimmicks to increase the volume of sub-prime mortgages, and extending credit in ever more complicated financial debt packaging only makes the frenzied speculation worse. Eventually, it becomes prone to the same cycle of economic crises that urban development was initially intended to relieve. Only it is not the speculators that meet the sticky end, but the very low income people that they drew into borrowing. The bankers and speculators, through their securitised debt packaging, pass on the crisis to the rest of society. Hence why millions of Spanish people today are trapped in debt, and 155,000 Irish homes suffering massive mortgage arrears.

Harvey also highlights the ideological aspects of this continuous expansion of fictitious capital in the rebuilding of cities. The urban growth machine feeds the myth, for a while, that capital can be, in Marx's terms, 'automatically valorised by its own powers'. Capital in the form of land and property appears to somehow miraculously produce value on its own. As we know, thousands in Ireland during the boom fell for this delusion.

The urbanisation process under the rule of capital is also about ever greater control over people's lives. As in the early days of capitalism, cities grew rapidly to facilitate the supply of labour, along with the new rules, discipline and repression of urban life, and to meet the needs of industrial production. In China today, Harvey argues, we see a similar process at work but at breakneck speed. However much the Chinese government claims to regu-

late, a shadow banking system based on all the speculative and corrupt excesses of the west, has emerged to dominate property investments. Whether in Shenzhen, moving towards an extreme free-market liberalism, or Chongqing, which has taxed private capital to pay for council housing and social programmes, both Harvey underlines, remain undemocratic.

Today the growth of huge cities across the world occurs with the capitalist class aiming to keep under tight rein 'workers' lifestyles as well as their labour power, their cultural and political values as well as their mental conceptions of the world'. Post second world war in the US, the creation of a larger house-owning working class, from the point of view of capital, Harvey argues, killed two birds with one stone - revived the economy through a massive housing construction and suburbanisation and co-opted better paid white workers into conservative politics by debt encumbered ownership. The same political ploys were attempted in Thatcher's Britain and, in Ireland with extensive housing programmes introduced by Fianna Fáil.

Today, however, Harvey argues, and this is his reason for writing the book, similar attempts at buying off urban workers is much more fraught. Neoliberal urbanisation has produced glaring affluence and consumption for a tiny minority alongside impoverished, insecure, and indebted huge majority which is growing as the crisis and austerity programmes continue. In this situation, 'the city and the urban process it produces become major sites of political, social and class struggles'. Harvey's central theme is that the demand of the Right to the City can unite different struggles. The slogan was used by French Marxist Henri Lefebvre in 1968 in response to the urban explosion in Paris in that year. Harvey sees the slogan 'claiming some kind of shaping power over the processes over ur-

banisation and the ways in which our cities are made and remade and to do so in a fundamental and radical way.' This is all the more pressing because of the violent neoliberal attack upon the public provision of social goods - the urban commons - over the last three decades and its intensification, after the crisis, through draconian austerity plans which have reduced the supply of social supports and made more intense the private appropriation of the commons. Campaigns against the destroying of the coastline by marinas and luxury developments, and the selling off of natural resources have already become political flash points in Ireland.

The political points that he highlights are useful. Firstly, he reminds us that urban-based class struggles have accompanied the most spectacular attempts to overthrow capitalism. The Paris Commune, the Petrograd soviet of 1917, the role of Barcelona in the Spanish Civil War, the urban-based movements of 1968, all involved people taking over the city. The building of street barricades was the dramatic symbol of the revolutionary struggle for the towns. More recently, occupations of central squares in cities have become the focus of resistance to capitalism, as Tahrir square, City Hall, Madison, Wisconsin, Puerta del Sol Square in Madrid, Syntagma Square in Athens bear dramatic witness. The way that these separate urban revolts spontaneously linked up internationally showed that what capitalism has been doing to urban life, materially and culturally, is finding a powerful global echo in city-based resistance.

Secondly, he argues that urban based social movements can become the vehicle to join up the struggles. His claim that 'class power is organised around living as well as around working' and that connection is vital to the success of other social struggles, as the success of the Chilean and

Quebecois students have recently shown. The struggles of the Paris Commune and 1968 remain Harvey's points of reference. He reminds us that the Communards' first demand was to abolish night work in the bakeries but the second was to impose a moratorium on rents, which shows how the first workers' uprising understood full well the importance of linking of work-based and community based struggles.

Thirdly, he provides a strong critique of autonomist practices in recent urban movements. He is impatient with advocacy of 'horizontality' and 'non-hierarchy' which he sees as representing an obsession with organisational form that is almost 'narcissistic in its concern for personal interaction over wider social movements'. Horizontality 'can work for small groups but is impossible at the scale of a metropolitan region, let alone for the 7 billion people that inhabit planet Earth'. For Harvey, any anti-capitalist alternative of necessity has to abolish the dominant class relation that underpins the capitalist mode of production. Simply ignoring the overarching system, in the hope that alternative islands of cooperation can be built independently of this, Harvey says, is pie in the sky.

Despite Harvey's resolute anti-capitalism, however, he leaves some questions unresolved. His enthusiasm for the demand for Right to the City (itself, rather vague) implies the need to prioritise urban struggles over and above workplace based ones. He gives the impression that the collective working class based in large workplaces has radically fragmented, and concludes that the choice we have is to either 'bemoan the passing of that proletariat' or to change our conception of the working class and broaden it to include what 'the hordes of unorganised urbanisation producers'. Harvey seems to concur with Hardt and Negri, that the working class

has morphed into a kind of metropolitan, networked 'multitude' (even though Harvey is very critical of the autonomist practices that they have inspired). His embrace of an ill-defined urban community also leaves the impression that the experiments in municipal socialism pursued by the French Communist party or by Ken Livingstone offer useful models for both 'left reformists and more revolutionary movements'. These experiments themselves fell victim to the very logic that Harvey elsewhere deplores - tapering their programmes to the logic of the capitalist market. In the case of the 'red' Paris banlieues in the 1980's, we should remember, Communist-controlled councils ended up scapegoating immigrants in their attempts to provide housing for their constituents within the confines of the system.

More generally, Harvey seems to identify the main logjam facing capital as the problem of capital surplus absorption. This is not the only problem confronting capital in its search for profits. Rates of profitability is also an issue and when these are not sufficiently high in production, capital looks to other places for returns, like investment in financial markets and property speculation. The tendency for profit to decline, which Marx argued was the result of capitalists being forced, through competition, to invest in the non-profit making parts of production (machines and technology) was an inescapable contradiction of capitalist production that led to crises. Harvey appears to dismiss the falling rate of profit as no longer relevant and, indeed, focuses little, in this book, on the productive process of capitalism. Harvey refers to Marx's axiom that the only place where value is created is in the labour process of production, and that service sectors are dependent on the surplus value being produced in production, but does not seem to take account

of this fact in his analysis of the city and the role that it plays for capitalism. Harvey attaches greater importance to land, rent and speculation in capitalism, rather than production, with the result that the deployment of fictitious and real capital in urbanisation seems to be the core dynamic of the system itself.

This leads him to downplay production and workplaces as core sites for class struggles. Harvey presents the city as rather an undifferentiated generator of capital accumulation, and spends little time at looking at the social composition of those dispossessed by it. The more successful urban social movements have been precisely those which have managed to bring the power of organised labour to bear. This was the case in Oaklands, California, Madison, Wisconsin, in Spain in the general strike in December, in Syntagma Square, whose occupants from the beginning made connections with the unions and, most spectacularly, in the Tahrir Square movement in Egypt. Harvey alludes to the significance of the trade unionists in the El Alto movement in Bolivia but does not seem to draw conclusions from this. He argues that workplace struggles are far more likely to succeed when they are supported at community level, which is true. On the other hand, he does not seem to stress adequately the need for urban social movements to forge solidarity with the organised working class in order to take those struggles forward.

Harvey's book is a must-read for us as we build our movements against austerity in Ireland. It raises important theoretical questions about the role of the city in capitalism and begins the discussion around the tactical lessons we can draw from recent urban struggles across the globe. *Rebel Cities* is strong call, founded on principles of struggle and resistance to capital, to retake the cities that

have been appropriated by the powerful capitalist elite. While in Harvey's description of the city in capitalism, the agency of change is not always clear, the focus on

the anti-capitalist potential of those dispossessed by capital coming together in a city-based struggle remains a powerful message.