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Harvey, David

Pioneers

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By: Noel Castree

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David Harvey (b. 1935) is perhaps the world's most renowned and influential geographer. He is also among the most prominent Marxists of our time. Harvey's geographical Marxism has had a formative impact on research across a range of social science and humanities disciplines. He is primarily known as a theorist dedicated to revealing the essential elements of capitalism as a mode of producing goods and services.

Using a theory presented in his first major book as a Marxist, *The Limits to Capital* (1982), Harvey has subsequently made sense of the real geographies of contemporary capitalism in a series of widely read books, such as *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005). These "big agenda" texts rely on secondary evidence gleaned from diverse sources. Harvey rarely undertakes primary empirical research, nor has he for decades. He is best known for a set of big ideas that he has used to interpret the contemporary world, notably "the spatial fix," "time-space compression," and "accumulation by dispossession." However, his early Marxist writings helped change the fundamental understanding of the nature and aims of methodology in geography, planning, and urban studies. They demonstrated that the evidence researchers deem to be relevant to their inquiries, and thus the methods they employ to "make reality speak," are relative to their ontological assumptions and epistemological suppositions. By encouraging critique of the "tacit philosophy" undergirding the choice and use of certain research methods, Harvey showed that methodology is the servant of fundamental "worldviews," one of which is Marxism. Because these worldviews have political content and political implications, he further showed that methodologies are necessarily implicated in the world as much as they are a means for "getting at" the world.

Although not alone in making these arguments, Harvey's critique of positivist methods in the early 1970s had a big effect on research in human geography and urban studies. It encouraged a view of methods less wedded to the scientific axiom of a singular "truth" as the goal of research. This view remains profoundly relevant to the choice and use of research methods in social science. This entry focuses on Harvey's turn to Marxism in the 1970s and summarises his arguments about methodology, pointing to their wider implications.

Academic Biography

Harvey was born in England in 1935 and raised in Gillingham, Kent. He completed his BA and PhD at Cambridge University in the Department of Geography, leaving in 1960. During the 1950s, as was common in British geography departments, Cambridge stressed the importance of regional study—that is, the analysis of geographical particularity and difference—in its degree programmes. The Cambridge Department of Geography was also known for its research into historical geography. Accordingly, Harvey's doctoral thesis focussed on the changing location of hop production in 19th-century Kent. However, no sooner had he finished his thesis than Harvey started to move in an altogether different intellectual direction. He spent the 1960s working as a lecturer in geography at Bristol University. It was during his time at Bristol—which was punctuated by a leave to study at Pennsylvania State University, a major centre for the new scientific and quantitative geography—that Harvey first made his name as a philosopher and theorist of positivism.

From the late 1950s, a generation of younger geographers (like Bristol's Peter Haggett) had been moving away from their teachers' study of geographical uniqueness and variety. Instead, by measuring phenomena according to their absolute position, movement, and relative location, they tried to reinvent geography as a search for spatial order. Harvey's landmark book *Explanation in Geography* (1969) gave the profusion of statistical and numerical methods and techniques in 1960's human geography a robust and consistent intellectual foundation. It also aligned geography with the so-called real sciences like physics and, for some geographers, boosted the discipline's self-image.

Explanation in Geography, ironically, marked both the high point and the end point of Harvey's desire to fashion the foundations of a properly scientific geography. Almost immediately after the book's publication, Harvey left England for the United States, where he took up an associate professorship at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, MD. This was doubly significant. First, though a port city like Bristol, Baltimore was far poorer and had suffered major economic decline throughout the post-World War II years. Second, at Hopkins, Harvey encountered a group of graduate students and academics who wanted to understand the radical ideas of the 19th-century political economist Karl Marx. In part, this reflected the recent availability of English translations of Marx's key writings; in part, it reflected a belief that Marx's ideas might help make sense of the political turmoil that erupted worldwide in 1968.

It was in this context that Harvey wrote *Social Justice and the City* (1973), a book of equal—if very different—significance to its predecessor. It focussed on how to alleviate urban ills like poverty. Where *Explanation in Geography* was detached from its wider sociopolitical context—namely, the attempts of UK Prime Minister Harold Wilson's Labour government to make Britain a fairer society, and the more distant civil rights and anti-Vietnam War protests in the United States—*Social Justice* was thoroughly immersed in it. The book charts Harvey's rapidly changing intellectual and political trajectory. Part 1, titled "Liberal Formulations," contains essays that focus on how existing mechanisms of urban planning could bring about a more just urban society in Western countries. But Part 2, called "Socialist Formulations," moves beyond the reformism of Part 1 and proposes a revolution in urban affairs predicated on the ideas of political economists like Marx. One of the book's key essays, "Revolutionary and Counter-revolutionary Theory in Geography and the Problem of Ghetto Formation," proposed nothing less than a wholesale rejection of the way human geographers both studied cities and thought about solving urban social problems at that time.

Harvey's turn to Marxism meant that he became preoccupied with capitalism and its workings. Harvey spent the mid-to-late 1970s reading Marx's later works, like *Capital* and *Grundrisse*. This effort culminated in Harvey's most sophisticated book, *The Limits to Capital*. This book is a reconstruction and extension of Marx's late 19th-century theory of capitalism; the extensions are primarily geographical because Marx paid little attention to how geography influences capitalism's operation. The result was a general theory of capitalism in which change through time is shown to be reliant on growth across, and the reconfiguration of, terrestrial space.

In the mid-1980s, with his reputation as the leading Marxist geographer (indeed, human geographer) established, Harvey returned to the specifically urban issues that were the focus of *Social Justice*. Inquiring

into the specific nature and problems of capitalist cities, his two “Studies in the History and Consciousness of Urbanisation” take the perspectives of “structure” and “agency,” respectively (to simplify rather). *The Urbanization of Capital* (1985a) unfolds a Marxian theory of how capitalism produces cities with characteristic material properties and contradictions; *Consciousness and the Urban Experience* (1985b) theorises how real people respond to having to live in capitalist cities, especially those who lack economic and political power.

Shortly after publishing these two books, Harvey returned to England as the Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography at Oxford University. In retrospect, the late 1980s represented the start of a sharp decline of interest among Anglophone academic leftists in Marxism. While at Oxford, Harvey wrote his best selling book *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), a critical analysis of the rise of postmodernism in several walks of contemporary cultural life (including urban consumption, architecture, and even academia). Returning to Johns Hopkins in 1993 for academic and personal reasons, he then revisited the theme of social justice and linked it to environmental issues in his fifth single-authored book as a Marxist, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (1996). Harvey then moved to City University New York, where he is a Distinguished Professor of Anthropology. In his many years there, he has written a number of best selling books intended for broader audiences beyond academia. Each focuses on a key geoeconomic and geopolitical aspects of present-day capitalism such as the global financial crisis of 2007–2008 (analysed in his book *The Enigma of Capital*, 2010). These texts have been a key means by which Harvey has tried to demonstrate the enduring relevance of Marxist theory and thereby address the criticisms of it that surfaced when *The Condition* was written.

Harvey's Critique of Methodological Objectivism

Although it is often forgotten today, one of Harvey's most significant early contributions to thought during his turn to Marxism was methodological. In *Explanation in Geography*, Harvey had respected the conventions of modern science. He had assumed that there is a world of social and biophysical phenomena existing independently of researchers. The job of the researcher, so scientific convention had it, was to find suitable methods to gather evidence that, if interpreted correctly, would disclose hitherto unknown or guessed at truths. Harvey codified this in the inductive and deductive approaches to research, with method choice in each case dependent on the real-world demands of the topic under investigation. In all cases, research “neutrality” was the key, and “bias” a boo word. However, in *Social Justice*—just 4 years later—Harvey's fundamental view of research methods was entirely different.

To illustrate how and why, Chapter 4 of Harvey's book, titled “Revolutionary and Counter-revolutionary Theory and the Problem of Ghetto Formation” (first published as a journal article in 1972), is instructive. In it, Harvey recounts how leading analysts of modern Western cities explain common patterns of land use shared between places as diverse as Chicago and Sydney. For instance, in *Location and Land Use* (1964), William

Alonso had focussed on the locational decision-making of diverse actors endowed with varying amounts of monetary resources. He envisaged urban land use as governed by patterns of “bidding” whereby actors compete to buy or rent parcels of land (or buildings) according to their interests and goals. For instance, retailers will want to locate in the central business district (CBD) to have access to large numbers of consumers; meanwhile, professionals may want large houses and a leafy residential environment and can afford to commute to work in the CBD, thus gravitating to the suburbs. In between, inner-city “donut” areas exist because poorer urban residents need access to jobs concentrated in (or near) the CBD and cannot readily afford the transport costs of commuting from the suburbs to work. Overall, in Alonso’s view, a “rational geography” ensues that can be explained with reference to resource constrained decisions made by actors with diverse “preferences” for land use.

In detail, this rational geography will vary somewhat from city to city, as Alonso thought. To research this land use patterning empirically, urban analysts had a number of methodological options, including questionnaires and interviews with representative samples of each main category of urban actor (e.g., private firms, government organisations, low-income workers, wealthier retirees). In each case, information about locational decision-making would be gathered in which variables like price, time availability, ease of access, and so on, would be measured.

Harvey took issue with this way of studying urban land use, inspired by Marx’s critique of the capitalist mode of production. This critique situated urban actors in sets of social relations, norms, and regulations that confronted them as “structures” that, though far from natural, were difficult to alter. One was the norm of private property, enforced through all manner of regulations upheld by the law and police. In this light, one common and problematic feature of Western cities—inner-city poverty, high unemployment, crime, and related maladies—was not the unfortunate result of “constrained preferences” among the poor. Instead, it was a geographical expression of the systemic inequality integral to the functioning of capitalist societies. For instance, landlords able to afford inner-city housing legally enjoy the power to charge people relatively high rents (per unit area), leading to high population densities, or lower rents for poorly maintained properties. Either way, inner-city residents born into such conditions found it hard to escape them without serious intervention by governments in the name of social justice.

Harvey’s point about methods and data, then, was both simple and powerful. He argued that the “realities” one is seeking to shed light on are not simply “out there” awaiting discovery through unbiased use of suitable techniques, like social surveys. Instead, as his critique of Alonso showed, methods and data are the servant of the way one “carves up” the world conceptually prior to any empirical research. For instance, instead of focusing on supposedly sovereign urban actors with their bundles of resources, preferences, and locational options, as a Marxist Harvey urged analysts to focus on relations of power and inequality between employers, rentiers, workers, and government. Methodologically, such a focus might, for example, yield ethnographic research into landlord–tenant interactions or interviews with local government officials about the politics behind public housing provision over time (e.g., lobbying of mayors by certain construction companies). Or the focus might be on how the decisions of power urban actors impinge on the locational circumstance of the

poor, about which Harvey and Lata Chatterjee published a Baltimore study in 1974.

This alternative focus was not, however, common among 1960's urban geographers, with their "scientific pretensions" to reveal the socioeconomic causes of geographical order. Here, Harvey made a further important argument about the relativity of methods and data to basic assumptions about reality. He described as "status quo" approaches those, like Alonso's, which had sufficient power in academia and beyond to "frame" research projects at the expense of other approaches, like Marxism and radical feminism. The upshot was that, as Harvey saw it, choices about social research methods boiled down to who could win the battle to define the basic units of what is taken to be societal reality.

To summarise, Harvey pioneered the critique of methodological objectivism in urban studies and wider human geography, if not in the wider social sciences. He showed that the relevance of methods to a research question, and the significance of the evidence they produced, was thoroughly contextual and political. Harvey was not critical of any particular methods (e.g., focus groups, video diaries). Instead, he cautioned against the view that a single social reality awaited the "right" mix of methods and data to reveal its truth. As several academic critics of postmodernism noted in the 1990s, there was a paradox in Harvey's position. The deobjectification of reality that Harvey recommended was contradicted by his own confident claim that a Marxist perspective was superior to the supposed neutrality of a conventionally scientific analysis of society. He vouchsafed this superiority, ironically, with reference to the realities of capitalist society.

Further Readings

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