

Mobility, Crisis, Utopia

An Interview with David Harvey

Merijn Oudenampsen, Miguel Robles-Durán

Interview – May 9, 2011

Space is not a given, but is continuously produced, reproduced and reconfigured. Taking up where the French urban theorist Henri Lefebvre left off, the Marxist geographer David Harvey has focused on the development and incorporation of a spatial analysis in Marxist theory. He has emerged as one of the foremost intellectual commentators on the global financial crisis, portrayed in his recent book *The Enigma of Capital* (2010) as an instance of those same structural contradictions Karl Marx forewarned us about.

In 1873, Jules Verne's novel *Around the World in Eighty Days* appeared, in which Phileas Fogg, an English nobleman, accepts a bet to circumvent the globe. The novel, a portrait of British Empire at its peak, was a celebration of the cult of mobility and modern transportation.¹ The world was now within arm's reach – at least for those who were rich enough to afford it. Fourteen years earlier, writing a series of sketches and annotations that are now known as the *Grundrisse*, Karl Marx described this quest for mobility as the structural drive within capitalism towards 'the annihilation of space with time': 'While capital must on one side strive to tear down every spatial barrier to intercourse, i.e. to exchange, and conquer the whole world for its market, it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time, i.e. to reduce to a minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another. The more developed the capital, therefore, the more extensive the market over which it circulates, which forms the spatial orbit of its circulation, the more does it strive for an even greater extension of the market and for greater annihilation of space by time.'²

Written in an earlier phase of what is now commonly called globalization, what stands out is how little Marx's observations on the spatial dynamics of capitalism have seemed to age, in a time that is characterized by the ever-greater expansion of global markets and the ever-growing pace and volume of transported goods, people and financial capital. According to Harvey, laws of competition drive corporations and states to seek advantage through superior command over space and time as much as through technological innovation. As a consequence, the 'collective psyche' of capitalist societies is taken up by the conquest of space and time, a mobility fetish arises, for much of the same reasons that a fetish belief in technological progress takes hold: both are essential for capitalist innovation and growth. Accordingly, the celebration of hypermobility, represented by publications such as Thomas Friedman's *The Earth is Flat* (2005), or by Rem Koolhaas's eulogy of the kinetic elite in *S,M,L,XL* (1993), has been a structural and persistent trope of capitalist modernity over the past 150 years.

In contrast to the celebratory nature of the dominant view of mobility in society, Harvey sketches a more complicated and contradictory picture. His central concern, which he reflects upon in his work *The Limits to Capital* (1999), is the barriers that exist towards ever-

greater capital accumulation. Where to reinvest the profit accumulated throughout previous economic cycles? One of the strategies for resolving this problem has been the spatial fix, the geographical expansion and restructuring of the economy, which has been an integral part of the last phase of globalization. In the history of economic crises, and through the deployment of the spatial fix, there is a persistent tension between capital that is invested in the built environment for longer periods of time – ‘fixed capital’ – and the competitive drive towards ever-greater expansion and mobility that renders existing infrastructure obsolete. Starting out from the building boom in nineteenth-century Paris under Haussmann, to the post-war redevelopment of American suburbia, to the real estate boom in China and the redundancy of entire newly built cities, capitalism is always on the lookout for another ‘fix’, the frantic and irrational nature of which becomes only startlingly clear when overproduction ensues and value evaporates.

Though in the short term the financial crisis seems to have been largely contained and averted, in the long run the unending appetite for compound growth is bound to encounter its limits, ecological or otherwise. The brunt of Harvey’s work has been focused on the description and analysis of what is, but another significant part of his work has been the speculative exploration of what could be. In *Spaces of Hope* (2000), Harvey advanced some of these utopian explorations, and in the *Enigma of Capital* Harvey is cautiously continuing on that path: ‘While nothing is certain, it could be that where we are now is only the beginning of a long shake out in which the question of grand and far reaching alternatives will gradually bubble up to the surface.’³

What Harvey anticipates in his utopia at the end of *Spaces of Hope* – in the years after capitalism’s final crisis – is the slow self-assembly of relational political bodies outside the conceived boundaries of a state. Granting that new technology would make a much more horizontally organized society technically feasible, Harvey aims for a politics beyond the oldest schism of the left: that between the anarchist and the Marxist tradition exemplified by the furious polemics between Marx and Bakunin over the course of the Paris Commune in 1871. Harvey’s utopian agenda is to construct a dynamic set of intense interrelations that allow their co-evolution into an ecological totality of political will. Granting that we don’t fall into common determinisms, the ‘new’ will come when we begin to conceive movement as an uneven totality, radically reassembled by the interplays between daily life, social relations, production, technologies, imaginations and our relation to nature.⁴

Merijn Oudenampsen & Miguel Robles-Durán: Paul Virilio in Speed and Politics (1977 / 1986) talks about the arrival of a class division of speed. Mobility is stratified, between what Rem Koolhaas has called the ‘kinetic elite’, and those banlieusards and ghetto dwellers that rarely exit their neighbourhood. In your work you talk about a competitive necessity for capitalists to achieve a superior command over space and time, how in your view is mobility structured?

David Harvey: It is really difficult to generalize about this because the motivations for migrating are usually multiple, it’s an overdetermined kind of problem. Don’t forget the difference between cross-border mobility and internal mobility; it is very significant. You have had these mass movements internal to China, hundreds of millions of people come off the land and have gone into the cities. That’s a migratory stream that has of course been encouraged. There is a certain degree of push and there is a certain degree of pull. You have a phenomenon like that, you then look at the consequences for mobility in the formation of the European Union, all of a sudden people from Poland are servicing the hotels around Heathrow and Lithuanians were in the Irish pub when Ireland was still humming along. But now, quite a lot of people have gone back because of the crisis. So there are a lot of flows around that occur for very different reasons. Concomitant with that, among the lower classes there is of course the question of remittances; the flows of remittances around the world are huge. They have diminished somewhat in the last couple

of years but there are certain villages you can go to in Mexico or Ecuador, frankly they just live off remittances. One of the problems with that is that people are just using the remittances to live. The hope would be that the money that is sent back would provide the resources for some kind of autonomous development. As far as I know, studies suggest that this does not happen very often.

In the upper class you have this tremendous reassignment because of people continuously moving around. What you typically get are these ghetto-like structures in places like Manhattan, where the transnational bourgeoisie can park itself for two or three years before it moves onto Shanghai or somewhere else ... You have a completely different pattern of mobility there, coupled also with something else. I mentioned earlier the importance of the cost of social reproduction. To train a doctor in this country is extremely expensive. Most people who get into that area, when they finally get a job they usually have about a half a million dollars in debts. You can hire somebody who comes fully qualified and well trained from India without any of those debts. Hospitals are under the gun right now so they are increasingly looking for a labour source that does not have those overhead costs attached to it. That labour source can depress the wages so that the American who's got half a million in debt finds that he cannot get enough money unless he goes into private consultancy, something that a doctor with a social conscience would not want to do, but finds himself forced to do as a result of migration. The consequences are manifold and if you look at it, the USA since the 1970s in particular has been underinvesting in education because it can get educated people from elsewhere. In fact it is a dispossession of resources from the rest of the world. This is not beneficial in aggregate at all. You have to look at it in strata, at the same time you look at the *banlieues* in Paris and you see populations that are effectively trapped in space and ghettoized. You have to be very careful about making any kind of simple generalizations.

In your work you write that crises are never resolved within our economic system, they are merely moved around. One way this is being done is from the books of the banks towards the books of the governments. But you write about a specifically spatial element to the resolution of crises: the spatial fix, the expansion of capitalism towards as yet underdeveloped areas and a form of 'creative destruction' of non-viable infrastructures in developed economies. Is there a spatial fix at work in the present context?

The spatial fix as it unfolded in countries like the USA or the UK during the 1980s and the 1990s was more about cannibalizing the abandoned de-industrialized world, it was not about extending outwards so much as it was rebuilding internally: loft conversions, waterfronts, etcetera. At present, the aging infrastructure of the USA requires massive renewal. Obama wants to do these things, but of course that is all being rejected by the Republican right wing because to go that path would be to go a bit Keynesian. To some degree their logic is that if they can keep the economy in its current state of very high unemployment, but with very high profit rates for capital, they'll stand a very good chance of destroying Obama in the next elections. The Republicans are rejecting Obama's plan for high-speed rail, they rejected his 55 billion dollar infrastructure plan. They are rejecting any kind of spatial reconfiguration. In which case, where is surplus capital going to go? Well, where it has been going all along, it is going to the emerging economies. In fact, one of the worries right now, one of the reasons why you have a strong revival of emerging economies, is that you have a capital outflow. There is a strong capital inflow to fund the US debt, but there is a strong outflow of investment capital.

When the financial crisis occurred, we heard many apocalyptic predictions, aired by commentators and intellectuals, especially those on the left, about the imminent collapse of capitalism and the ideological implosion of neoliberalism. Reading the newspapers now, you get the feeling the system is back on track. Where are we now, what are the mutations that are taking place as a consequence of the financial crisis?

I think that the crisis, such as it is, is technically over, for a year and a half now. Formally, in this country it was supposedly over in June 2009. China went into a dip and came out of it almost within a year. There is not an economic rationale behind the present crisis, but there is a huge political rationale. This political rationale has been there in two forms, all along. For the first, we can go back to events like the Mexican debt crisis of 1982, where they bailed out the banks and then passed on the cheque to the people. Now is a time of passing on cheques, in other words we are still firmly in the neoliberal trajectory. The second element concerns the USA in particular, but you can see elements of it in the UK and Europe as well. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan ran up the debt in a huge way, through an arms race with the Soviet Union and also through a huge tax cut to the rich. His budget director at one point said: our rationale was that if we would run up the debt, then you could use that debt situation to go after all of the social programmes you didn't like. And he said: that was our strategy. Now what did Bush junior do? He came in and cut taxes on the rich just as Reagan had done. He fought two wars of choice, running up a huge debt on the wars. The third thing he did was to allow a Medicare drug subscription benefit, which was a huge subsidy to the pharmaceutical industries. During those years, Dick Cheney kept on saying: Reagan taught us that deficits don't matter. So now the point has been reached where the deficit situation can be used to go after all the social programmes. So the crisis – in brackets – is being extended. People are focusing on unemployment, but now the crisis is not about unemployment at all, it is about the debt that is being used to externalize the cost of social reproduction.

There seems to be a contradiction here. A new wave of austerity measures is being implemented, there seems to be a reinvigoration of the neoliberal agenda, with the Big Society ideas as presented by the UK conservatives as the clearest example. But you yourself in the Enigma of Capital state that the most logical reaction from the side of capital would be a Keynesian response, to increase effective demand, because this is where you traced the origins of the crisis in the first place. The opposite is happening. Recently George Soros also questioned the cutbacks in the UK as counterproductive, likely to plunge the UK into a crisis. Could you elaborate on this contradiction?

First of all, there is a Keynesian project in motion. That is of course in China, but also in Latin America where the rate of growth in countries like Brazil and Argentina is 8 per cent right now. China is using Keynesian tactics to come out of the recession: vast infrastructural investment projects, building new cities, allowing wages to rise. There is one half of global capital that is a big Keynesian, then there's our half, the USA and Europe, which is going the other direction. The right question here is whose interest this serves. Corporations right now are making higher rates of profit than they have made for a very long time. They are doing extremely well. In part because widespread unemployment allows them to introduce what is called a two-tier labour system, in which people who are employed are under one kind of contract, and people who are being newly brought in are under another kind of contract, with almost no benefits. So the rate of profit for singular capitalists right now, is as high as it has ever been. In other words, you don't have enough of a fraction of capital right now that thinks like Soros, and who promote the politics you would need from the standpoint of stabilizing capitalism in general. What business is constituted of is like the Koch brothers, who have always hated any kind of government regulation of the environment, any kind of interference that forces them to internalize any cost of social reproduction. Then there are other factions: finance capital is very happy right now; they don't want to see any kind of change. When Marx talks about this in the

chapter on the working day, he writes that in competition with each other, individual capitalists pursue a politics of *après moi le déluge*.

What do you make of the relation between new communication technologies and the uprising in the Arab world? In Western media reports on the events, Facebook and Twitter become the signifiers of modernity and Western freedoms, while at the same time Western governments are highly ambivalent towards developments in Egypt, and the policies of Facebook and Twitter are far from controversial themselves. To what extent do you perceive technology acting as a fetish belief and to what extent does it offer real possibilities of challenging power?

I am very suspicious of this overemphasis on Facebook and Twitter. Even if I accept that the youth movement there, which was a very important part and may have triggered the uprising, certainly used that as a tool. I do not think it is any different to what happened when the telephone came around or the radio. In other words, all sides can use it, and there is no inherent political quality to it.

If you looked at the pictures of the people on the square, listened to the interviews, they were not middle-class youth, there were some but a lot of them were ordinary folks. And there has been quite a history throughout North Africa in general, of riots and uprisings around the cost of food. I bet a lot of the people came out because of the cost of food and they came out not because of Twitter, and they were not so much concerned about abstract freedoms, they were concerned about the monopoly pricing that is going on and there not being enough food to eat. There has been a lot of industrial unrest in Egypt since 2002 or 2003, strikes are illegal in Egypt, or they were under Mubarak, and there have been strikes. Working people have been very discontented. Maybe the students triggered it, but it would not have gone anywhere if there wouldn't have been other sources of discontent that were ready to blow, which came in and were very much a part of it. There was a very interesting comment from a reporter on MSNBC, Richard Angle. He went to live in Egypt 15 years ago, for four years he lived in a very poor area of Cairo, and learnt the language. He was asked what he saw as one of the triggers. And he said: 15 years ago, when I was with all of these people they were very poor, but they got by and they felt that somehow that was their life. Now they are hit with the fact that somebody has built a huge mansion just across the street. They suddenly see the signs of immense wealth. And they are as poor as they ever were, if not poorer: services are non-existent or declining. The reporter said the social inequality has become so much more blatant and in your face. He said for a lot of people this has sowed their discontent. There is a theory of discontent that talks about relative deprivation. If there is absolute deprivation, if everybody is deprived, you do not get a revolution. When there is relative deprivation you are much more likely to get huge discontent. He was very explicit about it: he talked to people that said: How come I am still so poor while they have become so rich? A class antagonism which has now become explicit, the same can be said of the workers struggles of the last ten years. All those elements are a part of what is happening there. You have to look at all those things before you tell me it was entirely due to Facebook or Twitter.

In your book *Spaces of Hope* you speculated on a possible scenario of a transition from capitalism. With the benefit of hindsight would you change your utopian speculation on the future?

D. Harvey I set a scenario for the transition, I could write another scenario now, and the interesting question would be how much I would change it. As part of that, I'm starting to think more coherently as to what it means to be anti-capitalist, and what capitalism could get displaced by. One of the things I did was to take the first four chapters of Volume II of *Capital* and look at the definition of capital that comes out of these four chapters. Marx says it is not money, because money can only do as money does, help you buy and sell, and

besides, there is lots of money going around that has nothing to do with capital. The other thing about money is that money is the only stage in the circulation process where you can clearly see whether you have made a profit or not. Therefore there is a fetish belief that money is capital. Marx is very strong in his language; he says you are deluded if you think money is capital. Then he asks: is the buying and selling of labour power a definition of capital? No the exchange of labour for money has been going on all along. In fact that is a precondition, as is money for the rise of capitalism. He goes on and says: Can we look at it in terms of commodification? The answer is no, commodity exchange has been around for a long time. And then he talks about production: it is not even production, you know production can occur in all kinds of ways. You realize that the definition of capital that he is giving is that of a social relation between capital and labour, which permits the production of surplus value. Which then goes back to those passages in the *Grundrisse*, where he says that production dominates over all else, but it is the production of surplus value, not just physical production. If you want to be an anti-capitalist, you are committed to the abolition of that class relation between labour and capital, and the production of surplus value. That would be the core of the anti-capitalist agenda. What do you replace it with? Nowhere in *Capital*, this is really interesting going through it, nowhere does Marx ever say the state should do it. He says it is the association of labourers. In effect he is coming down on the side of worker control, autonomy of workers collectively deciding on the course to follow. You then look at the big history of all of this. That idea is all around and we see it also in the contemporary factory occupations. One of the good things of taking that as the core of what the socialist project is about is that if you would take polls in the country to ask if that is a good idea, you would probably get a 70 per cent approval rating. Look at the popular response when the people of Windows Republic in Chicago sat down and took over their factory, everybody said, yeah! You get a tremendous popular response that you would not get if the state took over. This is the core of what we should be doing. That comes out several times in *Capital*, is what its imaginary is. Which ironically is not too far from where Proudhon was. Marx could be paranoid about some people and he got a bit paranoid, he went overboard to discredit everything that Proudhon said. For that reason he probably got very nervous about articulating this notion of the associated labourers too much, because it would probably get muddled up with Proudhon. Again that line gets to notions such as mutual aid and the anarchist tradition. It is much easier to integrate it in that tradition than it is to argue for state control of the means of production.

Merijn Oudenampsen (1979, Amsterdam) is a sociologist and political scientist. He is affiliated to Tilburg University, doing a PhD research project on political populism and the swing to the Right in Dutch politics. He was guest editor of the 20th edition of the art journal *Open*, titled the *Populist Imagination* (NAi 2010). He edited a volume titled *Power to the People, een anatomie van het populisme* (Boom | Lemma 2012). His essays and other texts are archived on merijnoudenampsen.org.

Miguel Robles-Durán, urbanist, is co-founder of 'Cohabitation Strategies', a cooperative for sociospatial development based in New York and Rotterdam. He directs the Urban Ecologies Graduate Program at the New School / Parsons in New York.

Footnotes

1. A similar theme is present in the other works of Jules Verne, broadly esteemed as one of the first science-fiction writers. He wrote on space travel in *De la terre à la lune* (*From the Earth to the Moon*, 1865) and on underwater exploration in *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (*Twenty Thousand Miles Under the Sea*, 1869) long before these became technical realities.

2. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993 [1859]), 538–539.

3. David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 225.

4. In a short essay titled 'On the Deep Relevance of a Certain Footnote in Marx's Capital', first published in the journal *Human Geography* (vol. 1, no. 2, 2008), Harvey addresses sociospatial development in terms of six relational criteria derived from footnote 4 in Chapter 15 of *Capital* vol. 1. These points are: 1. The relation to nature, 2. The technological mixes envisaged, 3. The forms of production to be implanted in the city, 4. The predominant forms of social relations, 5. The qualities of daily life, 6. The mental conceptions of the world.

Tags

Capitalism, Urban Space

This text was downloaded on April 24, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
onlineopen.org/mobility-crisis-utopia