

Response Paper to David Harvey “Contested Cities: Social Process and Spatial Form”

David Harvey’s short text urges the reader to regard urban spaces not simply as vessels in which historical processes take place, but rather as deeply involved in these and also influenced by them. Although he is successful in explaining why the urban should be a “salient category in our analyses” (232), which he claims is rarely the case at the time of writing, the article is marred by a lack of clarification at times. Furthermore, the examples he chooses are deeply politicized ones which, unsurprisingly for Harvey, are used to further an ideologically driven argument which is, perhaps, out of place in an academic work.

Process, Harvey argues, is meant to take “precedence over things” (233). Although this is not explicated, Harvey certainly seems to be arguing that urban spaces are meant to be understood dialectically. In his *Introduction to Marx’s Capital* Harvey explains that young children understand the world dialectically because “they see everything in motion”¹ and I believe this is what Harvey is now describing when “process takes precedence over thing” (233). It would, however, have been helpful to reader if it this understanding had been made explicit. When Harvey continues and refers to “a dialectical standpoint” (233) from which he is viewing the urban, the readers are still left alone in figuring out first what dialectical even means (although, given the length of the article, this is an excusable oversight) but more importantly, if they know the term, what type of dialectical understanding he is talking of. It would have been helpful had Harvey clarified his terminology.

The examples Harvey uses, and how they are employed, illustrate his Marxist outlook. However, they are perhaps not nuanced enough for an academic work. From the outset, his argument rests on the urban not being a category of analysis which he claims comes from “the bourgeoisie itself [...] hav[ing] lost much of its guilty conscience about cities” because “there is little to fear from socialist revolution” (232). This clearly demonstrates his political pursuit which is made clear at the end of the article, because the importance of studying cities lies in finding ways “through which to talk [about] how the cities of the future should be” for Harvey (237). Here, he

¹ Harvey, David. *Introduction to Marx’s Capital*. London: Version, 2010. 11.

shows his Marxist understanding of his role as an academic, because, like Marx himself, Harvey seems to be arguing not only for interpreting the world but changing it.²

Throughout the article, Harvey straddles the line between academic and activist, as he often does. Readers may find this jarring, expecting a more nonpartisan stance in an academic work. However, it is also invigorating to be shown ways in which academic work can have an impact on the world, and Harvey's comments about the importance of "a steady working out [...] of transformations" which could lead to "a long revolution" (237) can serve as inspiration for academics so inclined.

² "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to *change* it." from Karl Marx' *Eleven Theses on Feuerbach*, these words are now engraved on his tombstone.