

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Intervention Symposium

Did We Accomplish the Revolution in Geographic Thought?

It Lives: Notes on a Late-Century Classic

George Henderson

Department of Geography, Environment and Society

University of Minnesota

Minneapolis, MN, USA

hende057@umn.edu

Has “the revolution” in geographic thought been accomplished? Of course not! But what a great question, because perhaps it has in a certain sort of way run its course, if we understand what this “it” is. But first things first. Harvey’s essay, like so much of his work, is just a terrific piece of writing (Harvey 1972). To read it is to engage with something that is cogent, clear-headed, and just bristling with energy. It is absolutely *pissed off*. And yet it is also tempered, restrained, controlled. Jaw clenched, it wants to get its argument just so. It wants an audience and “we all know” *angry* does not necessarily sell.

What exactly did Harvey say those decades ago? And how did he say it? What made him think anyone would listen? What do these things tell us about where we are now? Sitting down to re-read the essay for the purposes of this panel, several of its aspects struck me in a way I do not recall having noticed quite so much before. (I first read it sometime in the mid-1980s and then again many times afterward.) Harvey’s essay has, first, an extraordinary faith in reason and in science. Should this be so remarkable? Reasoned argument after all is what geographers are supposed to do. No less, Harvey’s call to understand “objective social conditions” seems to call for reason. And won’t the resulting objective knowledge automatically create its audience,

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

because people of good will must also be reasonable? Secondly, I am struck by the claim that the dominant force to be understood in grappling with objective social conditions is the capitalist market. One might say that this makes sense given the ubiquity of capitalism—yes, even in 1972—and the way that certain of the same problems Harvey writes about keep repeating themselves in different cities over time. I am impressed, deeply (thirdly), with Harvey’s willingness to renounce his past positions, in this case the combined liberalism and positivism of much of his previous work. I do not think this auto-critique is a disingenuous feint. He is saying something about the way we are all subjects who get pulled into very powerful and beguiling slipstreams. Fourthly, is it not such classic Harvey to suggest that, through immanent critique, a new political subject is possible by calling to account the very mix of forces—that is to say, *promises* of a kind—that have formed subjects in the first place? Thus, in so far as these forces are represented in thought, in the academy, he aims to redirect in reasoned fashion the dominant and emerging streams of geographic thought (positivism, phenomenology, and materialism) toward revolutionary purposes. We see the very same strategy two years later in his truly brilliant examination of methodology in the study of population, resources, and science (Harvey 1974).

The question now is, how have these—I will call them *remarkable*—assumptions and approaches held up? And what might they have missed or given short shrift to in the first place? Ironies, if that is the word, abound. One of them is that in the intervening years since 1972 the search to rationally understand “objective social conditions” has become incredibly complex, so much so that the whole question has had to be reframed. For a major event in geographic thought is the push for greater reflexivity. This is a complicated story. Let me take a moment to signpost it.

- a. There has been a crisis of representation, in at least two respects. First, objectivity has felt different ever since Donna Haraway’s “situated knowledges” essay (Haraway 1988). From this essay we learned to be wary of what she called the “God trick” of the view from nowhere (or, what amounts to the same thing, the view from a privileged

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

somewhere) and we learned to at least posit, for her details were murky, that better so-called objectivity would result from situated, partial, plural perspectives. Objective knowledge is not singular knowledge. It is not knowledge that of itself builds unified subjects. Second, around the same time we learned from people like Doreen Massey (1991) and Fredric Jameson (1984) that capitalist reality itself had become incredibly difficult to “map”. Capitalism’s own objective condition was to produce geographically an infinity of convoluted surfaces, passages, teleconnections, and developmental pathways. And the social complexities were no less metastasizing.

b. Representation, in political terms, some learned also to see as a problem. Here I think of people like Gayatri Spivak (1988), Stuart Hall (2000), Chantal Mouffe (2000), Nicholas Thoburn (2003), and many others who articulated a non-identitarian politics. The struggle to escape social categories has become as much emancipation’s endgame as has making sure all social categories are included.

c. Affect and reason, it now seems clear, complicate each other in very important ways. I think we have learned so much better to understand that people are cathected to their worlds fundamentally. Affective ties, emotional commitments—they play a large role in what and how people think. Shown very cogently by Balibar (1998—especially his chapter on political anthropology), this is a constraint but also an opportunity for political life.

So, I am saying that after these developments which placed a premium on more reflexive knowledges, can this 1972 essay’s faith in objectively knowing the world, that is to say, letting objective social conditions instruct us, remain the same? I don’t think so. To be clear about what I am saying: Those objective social conditions (the “ecological problem”, the “ghetto problem”, as Harvey termed them) were real enough but they were *more real* than a simple faith in reason and objectivity could speak to, and they and their power to de-center (mostly rightly, in my view,

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

although there are strong disagreements on that front) soon came to deflect the force of Harvey's arguments and the way he pitched them.

A second irony is that while the knowledges produced by social movements have been of basic importance in constructing contemporary geographic thought, and while Marxism can be said to be part of this picture, Harvey did not at the time suture his essay to the movements of the day that are linked specifically to the problems he identifies. Harvey mentions that there is an "ecological problem" and an "urban problem" with not much to say about the social and political movements those problems give rise to and that themselves are sources/engines of social knowledge. Curious, for example, that part of the essay's title is "the problem of ghetto formation" and the discussion of this problem proceeds without the word "race" or "black" or "color" appearing at all in the essay. Nor do the words "Civil Rights" and "Black Panthers". Nor the names Angela Davis, Malcolm X, Fred Hampton. The social and cultural knowledges that social movements give rise to (yes, some of them identitarian), of which Harvey was no doubt aware, just don't make their way into the essay as the important *stuff* of knowledge, as *voices* of knowledge. The essay's demonstrated faith instead is, to repeat, in objective knowledge and reason, involving the placement of Marxism into the frame of objectivity, because of its singular capacity to spot the anomaly. (Remember, it is Thomas Kuhn's notion of the structure of scientific revolutions that plays a founding role in the essay [Kuhn 1962]. Harvey's having written a role for Marx in that specific dramatic structure has everything to do with his essay's power.) This is not completely wrong but Harvey would later write about Marx's epistemology, and epistemology as such, as something both more reflexive and less academic. Still, in 1972's "revolutionary" geography, trust is placed in the academy as the primary place where knowledge is produced, for purposes of applying it to problems that lie outside it. NB: This is not an unusual position, given that Harvey was writing at a time when universities were experiencing extraordinary growth in the US. "We are academics", Harvey wrote in his essay, "working with the tools of the academic trade" [1972: 10].) Yet the point is not to chastise the author here, for Harvey did have important things to say about certain of Geography's internal workings, and he

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

showed, as he would decade after decade, an uncanny knack for working Marx into prevailing scholarly imaginaries (e.g. Kuhnian paradigm theory). I want though to hint at something more structural at work: if we follow Foucault rather than Kuhn, every epistemic framework is a diagram, a framing, that produces a silence, an outside *belonging to* that framework. And this *outside* is in fact alive—thus the title of my essay—not simply an idea that one cannot see. In this sense Harvey’s essay is cut off from the sorts of movements that emerge out of the problem of ghetto formation, while these movements, with their own social and cultural knowledges, were in fact elbowing their way in (punching holes through diagrammatic walls?). Thus, the successful, if halting, creation of university departments of African American Studies, Ethnic Studies, Chicano Studies, and so on—the full panoply to come of the so-called militant particularisms Harvey (1997) would write about decades later. (This is to say nothing about the struggle of movements to remain radical in their very particularity, once they truck with dominant and universalizing academic discourses, as Sylvia Wynter’s [2006] bracing account of Black Studies demonstrates.)

But let me run a bit with the concept of the anomaly to name a third irony in the essay, because I very much like how Harvey turns this from a concept to an activity (another reason why I’ve titled my essay as I have). Kuhn argues that the ground for scientific revolutions is prepared by the piling up of anomalies that current knowledge can’t explain. These anomalies are objective conditions that the true empirical eye picks up on, whose basic empirico-logical sense leads its subject, who wants better knowledge, to break free from the paradigm that is now, thanks to the instructive anomaly, shown to be what it is—a paradigm. Cue Harvey: to cling to knowledge that makes light of anomalies, Harvey writes, is to look foolish. In an elegant stroke, he puts one and one together and argues we need to actively seek to look foolish. So, what is one way, now, that we (the putative we of Geography) look foolish? Without imputing that no one cares or is doing anything about it, and without cueing “diversity”, *Geography looks foolish* in how white it still is—in the “West”, the “Global North”. Its senior leadership is remarkably white

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

and remarkably male. Do we/they realize how much we/they are making the sound of their/our own obsolescence?

Fourth irony, a savory one now, is that the emerging objective social conditions of the late 1960s and early 1970s *did not*, Harvey reports, *in any direct way* bring him to the Marxist path. Marxism was for him a “powerful pattern of thought” in the early 1970s (Harvey 1972: 11) but his turn to Marx was “not premeditated”, he “stumbled upon it”, as he later noted (Harvey 2001: 7). If there is meaning here, it is that a gap opens up between what objective conditions call for and how individual biographies are positioned to respond. “Objective conditions” are not simply there. And individual intentions will not automatically hit their mark. I think the lesson of this might be that along with the search for anomalies in our explanations and interpretations of events, revolutionary thought requires us to make detours; to take a page from the “situationists” and be peripatetic, to act as if accidents need to happen, without necessarily knowing why or to what end. We need to reckon if at all possible with the fact that our disciplinary “diagrams”, however useful (and I do find them useful) will always put us in the path of oncoming traffic whose direction is more interesting than we might have imagined. This is another meaning, then, of the “it lives” in my title.

Has the revolution in geographic thought been successful? Well, what do we think is and would be the revolution in geographic thought? This question has become clearer to me thanks to Joaquín’s provocation. What I am saying is that the revolution in geographic thought, as Harvey had distilled it in 1972, was already running its course in his essay; it was immanent to the essay and a little self-dissolving right there. To recap: Harvey called for a revolution in geographic thought and it was in the nature of the call that its limits were also apparent. I’m not sure it would have been otherwise, as there were already other revolutions in the making.

References

Balibar E (1998) *Spinoza and Politics*. London: Verso

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

- Hall S (2000) The question of cultural identity. In S Hall, D Held, D Hubert and K Thompson (eds) *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies* (pp595-634) Oxford: Blackwell
- Haraway D (1988) Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies* 14(3):575-599
- Harvey D (1972) Revolutionary and counter revolutionary theory in geography and the problem of ghetto formation. *Antipode* 4(2):1-13
- Harvey D (1974) Population, resources, and the ideology of science. *Economic Geography* 50(3):256-277
- Harvey D (1997) *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Harvey D (2001) *Spaces of Capital*. London: Routledge
- Jameson F (1984) Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism. *New Left Review* 146:59-92
- Kuhn T (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Massey D (1991) A global sense of place. *Marxism Today* June:24-29
- Mouffe C (2000) *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso
- Spivak G (1988) Can the subaltern speak? In C Nelson and L Grossberg (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp271-313). London: Macmillan
- Thoburn N (2003) *Deleuze, Marx, and Politics*. London: Routledge
- Wynter S (2006) On how we mistook the map for the territory, and re-imprisoned ourselves in our unbearable wrongness of being, of *Désêtre*: Black Studies toward the human project. In L R Gordon and J A Gordon (eds) *Not Only the Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice* (pp107-169) London: Paradigm