

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Intervention Symposium

Did We Accomplish the Revolution in Geographic Thought?

The Limits of Revolutionary Geographic Thought

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The legacy of David Harvey's call for a "revolution in geographic thought" is rich with life today. His call, in particular, to use a Marxist lens to "subject the very basis of our capitalist society (with all its institutionalized scarcities) to a rigorous and critical examination" (1972: 10) has, indeed, been heeded, and has, in fact, revolutionized the discipline. Suffice it to say that neither I nor many other geographers I know would be geographers, or at least the kinds of geographers we are now, if not for Harvey's call. The efflorescence of Marxist geography has transformed the discipline from a largely positivist, politically conservative social science to a discipline that is on the forefront of critically oriented social science. Radical geography, however one might define it, is not on the margins of the discipline but rather at its center.

Even those geographers who have critically interrogated or altogether rejected Marxist approaches to critiques of capitalist society would not be producing the kind of

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work they do now had they not deemed it necessary to engage with Harvey and the legacy of his work. If Harvey hadn't written this piece, or if he had never become a geographer at all, sure, someone else may have reached a similar conclusion and the world around us would have certainly compelled geographers to engage in similar scholarly pursuits. But thankfully, David Harvey did write "Revolutionary and Counter Revolutionary Theory in Geography and the Problem of Ghetto Formation" as well as, of course, so many other revolutionary works over the past four and a half decades.

Nevertheless, there is a principal failure in Harvey's call and a collective failure on our part to fully heed this call for a revolution in geographic thought. Both are evident in this passage from his manifesto: "the driving force behind paradigm formation in the social sciences is the manipulation and control of human activity and social phenomena in the interest of man" (1972: 4).

Harvey's (1972) Failure

Despite Harvey's important critique of Kuhn's failure to take into account the social context within which scientific knowledge is produced and applied, Harvey fails to recognize here how his own position as a white, British-American, heterosexual, cis-gendered man might shape what he thinks is "the interest of man." He thus fails to notice how his social position might prevent him from seeing or more fully understanding various social problems—such as race, racism, patriarchy, transphobia, not to mention the intersection of these issues with capitalism—and potential revolutionary solutions to those problems.

This is especially relevant given the empirical subject of Harvey's article, "the problem of ghetto formation". Harvey's contention that a turn toward revolutionary

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theory should “not entail yet another empirical investigation of the social conditions in the ghettos” (1972: 10) is particularly troubling given his identity in contrast with the identities of many of the people who live in the “ghettos” of American cities. “There is already enough information [about ghettos]”, Harvey (1972: 10) posits, “in congressional reports, daily newspapers, books, articles, and so on, to provide us with all the evidence we need”.

This stance—that geographers (the vast majority of whom were white men at the time) do not need to even go to the ghetto, much less write about it, because we already know enough about it—is troubling not just for its inevitable methodological failure (lo and behold, places change between the time someone conducts research on them and when someone reads whatever article or report is published from that research; one ghetto is different from another; different researchers are going to identify different conditions in the same place, etc.) but more so for its paternalistic assumption. Harvey is assuming that his notion of revolution is the same kind of revolution that the people in impoverished, racialized neighborhoods would want. He is assuming that the problems he identifies in these neighborhoods are the same problems that those who actually experience them would identify. He is assuming that their nuanced voices, their diverse stories, their varied struggles do not and should not matter to the researcher or the so-called revolutionary.

We (largely white, male, heterosexual, cis-gendered) geographers should, in other words, revolutionize geographic thought so that *we* can effect the material revolution that *we* think *those* people need. No, no need to check in with them. We know what they want already.

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Thankfully, both David Harvey and the discipline more broadly have taken enormous methodological and political steps away from this sort of bigoted elitism.¹ That problem has not been entirely resolved, but feminist and poststructural geographers, in particular, have driven geography toward more reflexive and less economic approaches to a whole host of social problems. David Harvey and many other Marxist geographers, especially in the past 20 years, have largely followed suit.²

The discipline, put differently, has since created revolutions in geographic thought that are radically inclusive, nuanced, and borne of partnerships among academics, activists and organizers, and a whole host of other individuals and groups.

Our Failure

Nevertheless, geographic thought, however revolutionary it may now be, regularly fails to effect or even affect revolutionary change. Importantly, Harvey calls not just for a revolution in geographic thought but also a connected revolution in practice. For, as Harvey argues, “revolutions in thought cannot ultimately be divorced from revolutions in practice” (1972: 5).

But a fundamental stumbling block prevents most revolutionary geographic thought from materializing into revolutionary practice: most people do not read our articulations of geographic thought, no matter how revolutionary they may be. Our peer-reviewed articles are simply inaccessible to the overwhelming vast majority of the English-speaking (much less non-English-speaking) world. And even for those of us who can access academic journals, most articles go unread.

¹ For one particularly generative example, among many others, see Katz (1994).

² See, for example, Harvey (2012).

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Allow me to provide a personal example.

I recently published an essay in *Geographical Review* that encourages geographers to endorse the Palestinian call for an academic boycott of Israel (Ross 2016). I don't know if it was a particularly good or revolutionary essay, but I thought it was important enough that others should read it. After a few rounds of helpful editorial suggestions and my responses to those edits, the journal published it.

I posted a link to the article on Facebook—the first time I had ever shared an academic article on social media. A handful of friends, most of whom were Palestine solidarity activists, “liked” it but some of those folks and a few others commented that they could not access the article. I checked the link, and sure enough, the piece was inaccessible without a subscription. “I will send you a PDF of the article!”, I promised, as I am a professor at a university, and surely I would be able to access the essay. But I quickly discovered that my university does not subscribe to *Geographical Review*, so I could not access the article either. I then filled out an “online article request” form on my library’s website. I got an automatically generated email saying that my article should be delivered within the next 48-72 hours. Not wanting to wait, I emailed the editor of the journal and finally received the article two days later via email.

In the grand scheme of things, waiting 48 hours to access an article is not that big of a deal. But we do live in the 21st century where free and instant access is the norm, and where most people do not have the patience or the privileges to access otherwise fire-walled journal articles.³ I know of only one person who has definitely read the article, and

³ Moreover, the jargon with which most academic articles are written may be intelligible and sometimes even useful for those in the same field of study but to the rest of the world (i.e. the overwhelming majority of the planet, or most of the people who would be part of a revolution), academic writing is, at best, difficult to get through and, at worst, incomprehensible.

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at the time of this writing, no one has cited it. Perhaps it just was not a very good piece of writing, but even if it were, who could have known?

Contrast that experience with an article I wrote for *Mondoweiss*, a non-academic, free online publication centered on Israel/Palestine (Ross 2015). Immediately after returning from a trip to Gaza during the summer of 2015, I wrote a piece entitled “One Year Later: Gaza Still in Crisis” about the ongoing struggles Palestinians were enduring a year after the 2014 Israeli war on Gaza. *Mondoweiss* promptly published it two days later on the anniversary of the 2014 ceasefire that ended the Israeli massacres.

According to an email exchange I had with one of the editors of *Mondoweiss* several months later, 1,038 unique viewers accessed the article. An advocacy organization I work with in the Presbyterian Church (USA) e-blasted a version of the article to 1,500 people. Jewish Voice for Peace posted an excerpt of the article on its Facebook wall, which 1,400 people liked and 600 people shared.

Who knows how many of those people actually read the article? And the piece certainly did not foment any sort of revolution.

But it strikes me, nonetheless, that our current mechanisms for distributing geographic thought, and thus for beginning to integrate revolutionary geographic thought with revolutionary practice, are *counter-revolutionary* (not to mention anachronistic). Revolutionary geographic thought is, at best, useless if no one reads it. It is counter-revolutionary if it means that our energy and expertise are expended entirely on barely-read academic work and not on producing material that a broader public can access and incorporate into revolutionary practice.⁴

⁴ Numerous geographers have attempted to create more publicly accessible work. 12 years after he published “Revolutionary and counter revolutionary theory in geography,” David Harvey (1984: 9), for

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This is not to say that we should do away with peer-reviewed academic journals.⁵ There is value in working through the complex geographic ideas with other academic geographers. It is just that if we are going to respond to Harvey's ultimate call to not just revolutionize geographic thought but to connect it with revolutionary practice, we need to do a better job of communicating these ideas *with* and *to* a much broader array of people.

References

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instance, called for more “popular geography, free from prejudice but reflective of real conflicts and contradictions, capable also of opening new channels for communication and common understanding.”

Since then, geographers have written, spoken, and worked in numerous non-academic spaces, from protests to blog posts to grassroots organizing and beyond. Still, there is often a gap between those sorts of endeavors and the pages of academic journals where revolutionary geographic thought is conceptualized.

⁵ Nor are all peer-reviewed geography journals equally inaccessible. *ACME*, to give one example, has been free and open to the public for quite some time.

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