

Theory Talks

Presents

THEORY TALK #20

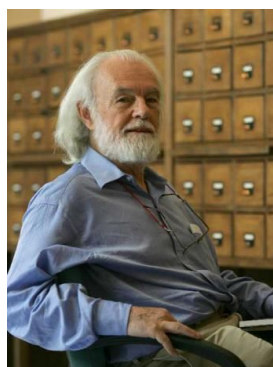
DAVID HARVEY ON THE GEOGRAPHY OF CAPITALISM, UNDERSTANDING CITIES AS POLITIES AND SHIFTING IMPERIALISMS

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

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DAVID HARVEY ON THE GEOGRAPHY OF CAPITALISM, UNDERSTANDING CITIES AS POLITIES AND SHIFTING IMPERIALISMS



Popular talk on globalization often downplays the importance of 'location' in International Relations. One of the protagonists of a spatial approach to issues of power is David Harvey, world renown for his urban geography and emphasis on the relationship between urbanization and inequality. In this *Talk*, Harvey – amongst others – lays out the dialectic dynamics of the capitalist and the territorial logic of power, explains why one should analyze cities in IR, and how different levels of analysis are necessary to comprehend current global processes.

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR (International Relations)? And what is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

I think the principal challenge is to theorize 'correctly' the relationship between the territoriality of political power and the spatiality of capital accumulation. To clarify that statement, one has to inquire into the nature of these respective processes. What are, for instance, capital flows? It is capital constantly moving around in space and time and therefore constitutes almost a molecular kind of flow or movement. Now that contrasts very much with the theoretical apparatus you apply when you think of the world as divided up into territorial blocks with distinctive structures of power and decision making. The tension between the territorial logic of power and the capitalistic logic of power is incredible, as we see right now with the current financial crisis that is sweeping through the world.

I've tried to work out for myself how to think about these two logics but I understand that my answers might not necessarily be the correct ones, but I think we should be having a far more serious debate on that question. One aspect of my position in relationship to this principal challenge is that we should not think about the capitalist logic of power as not grounded territorially at all. There is a tendency to think that there is something as 'globalization', as some abstract force which exists god knows where. The capitalist logic of power is creating territorial configurations all of the time, like cities, regional divisions of labor, and states. So capitalism has a clear geographical dimension and impact, which is, however, constantly changing – look, for instance, at the history of industrialization: since the English Industrial Revolution, we see a pattern of urbanization, and now we see a flow of labor going to China. So the logic of capitalism is not a space-less one in contrast to the fixed territorial logic of political power; rather, it is a conflict between two different conceptions and logics of spatiality, one involved in capital

accumulation and the other in the management of populations through territorial configurations known as the 'state apparatus'.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?

For me, the epiphany came in the late 60s, early 70s, when I understood that the field I was working in, that of quantitative geography, simply couldn't grasp what was going on politically in Vietnam nor economically with the crisis of '72-'75. I found a way to think about those realities while reading the work of Karl Marx: for the first time I thought to have found something that actually helped me make sense out of what was happening. However, it didn't make as much sense as I wanted it to, because Marx's work is not very geographical. In a way, I basically spent the rest of my life to bring the geography into Marx. At first, however, writing about Marx was feasible neither academically nor politically, so one had to write quite covertly – I had to turn to the writings of, for instance, Karl Polanyi – who, writing his *Great Transformation* in 1944, of course had to do with the same problems. Also, I had to recognize that in France there were a lot of people who were far ahead of me in working with Marx, such as [Henri Lefebvre](#) and [Manuel Castells](#). Which is one of the reasons I went to Paris during that period.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?

One of the fundamental things for students is to lay aside their preconceptions about an author or text and simply *read* it – that is, let the text speak to you and have an open dialogue with text. In terms of reading Marx's *the Capital*, for example, that doesn't just mean laying aside being anti-Marxist, but also possible *a priori* enthusiasm. It doesn't matter what you read, but you better read them extremely carefully, and actually read them instead of 'scanning the words of the Master'. If you're able to do that, you're probably going to be able to bring to bear what you read when you analyze what is happening in the real world with an open and creative stance, so you can come up with new explanations of the world, and tell my generation of scholars that it's time to go and retire.

Another thing which is important, and which provokes a lot of questions from students, is the object of study. Many students would like to investigate theoretical subjects early on in their life, and I think it to be a good existing convention that master- or PhD-theses concern concrete and specific real-world problems, because only in analyzing real-world issues does one find the sources and value of significant theory.

IR-scholars focus mainly on what you call the 'territorial logic of power'; besides that, you distinguish a 'capitalist logic of power'. Can you explain what you mean by that?

The territorial logic of power at any particular moment has defined boundaries and political power is orchestrated within those boundaries. The capitalist logic of power is quite simply that if I have money, and a lot of it, where do I put it? I launch it into circulation, people manage it for

me (hopefully they do so well), and then my money goes into China, flows to other parts of the world without any boundary at all – especially since the 70s, when capital controls were dismantled, which in effect means the state gave up trying to control the flows of money. After this event, states have to try and organize themselves around the principle of trying to snag some of this capital whirling around the world. A great metaphor for this principle is the so-called '[Cargo Cult](#)' where indigenous people in South-East Asia see all these planes flying over their land, and, having been told that these planes carry valuable goods but need landing strips to hand over those goods, start building air strips in their rice fields, in the hope of making a plane land. States, and cities, behave largely in the same way when it comes to attracting capital flows, by cutting taxes, regulations, creating human capital, etcetera. If they don't, their economy is in a mess.

But I don't wish to imply the state is completely separated from capital, because the Federal Reserve, for instance, still plays a powerful role in shaping monetary politics, thus exerting a certain political influence over capital flows. The two logics are thus dialectically interrelated.

You're a scholar famous for studying urbanization. Why the city? What do IR scholars miss out on for not including it in their analyses?

I'm interested first and foremost in processes, and specifically in that of urbanization. While a city is a 'thing', urbanization is a process. It doesn't stop at the city's edge, and is really about processes of unequal geographical development more generally. The tendency to ignore cities and simply treat the state as the only entity with agency is problematic. Of course, voting in the UN is bound to states, and that seems like a solution as good as any to me. But in terms of financial flows, for example, there's a more dense activity between New York and London than between the U.S. and Britain. And as we see in the current crisis, what goes on in these two cities is critical for the rest of the world. It's not the 'United States' that is acting, but a specific group of people in specific cities. The rest of the country has little agency in deciding over the future of their economy or, for that matter, over that of the rest of the world. The rest of the U.S. is object rather than subject in this process, becoming unemployed or foreclosed. So talking about the relationship between London and New York is just as important as is talking about the relationship between the states they belong to. Scholars just focusing on states, will be flabbergasted by the unfolding of this crisis, simply because significant things happen which one cannot capture looking solely at interstate dynamics.

The city is an arena of struggle in your work. What is the struggle about?

On a positive note, cities are capable to perpetually explore novelties and bring them into practice. Cities constantly change, which makes it exciting to study the processes that happen in them, even if it is negative ones – such as the fact that the cities we now live in, are essentially the result of processes of capital accumulation. The accompanying negative tendencies are gentrification, waves of property development, and the increasing 'high-endness' of construction, which means cities become increasingly shaped as places for higher classes. Luckily, there are people who fight the processes that are creating the cities they live in, and dislike. These urban

resistance movements ask: why is it that these people involved in capital accumulation can shape the city in their image and interest, and not in my image and interest? People everywhere are engaged in a popular, anti-gentrification fight. And while that sounds spectacular – and it is – it's a lot more 'normal' than one would think. Petitions in front of your local supermarket for a small park or for a car-less Sunday are part of this movement as well. The city is a terrain of struggle. Who is going to make the city? How is it going to be made? By what processes? Anyone living in a city is involved in this struggle, even by abstaining from participating actively.

An example of the implications of this struggle, can be found in the enormous influence of urban planners in the way we live. Take, for instance, [Georges-Eugène Haussman](#) of the Second Empire France, who rebuilt Paris not as it was, but as a 'modern' city with boulevards, thus determining the new way of life in France; and [Robert Moses](#), a 'master-builder' that singlehandedly inspired the suburbanization of the U.S., thus contributing strongly to the current American way of life, with all of its social and political implications.

So my fight would be against the privileged who, on account of disposing of vast sums of money, can engage in projects convenient to them that affect not only their own lives, but that of everyone accidentally living in the same spatially denominated unit called 'city'. Urban social movements are in every city and have real and significant agency.

For a lot of IR-scholars, the city is considered primarily as a historical predecessor of states as the principal units of sovereignty, and some IR-scholars now include the region as another level of governance. How do you relate to that vision?

I'd like to ask: what is the state? How did state-formation occur? There is a tendency to perpetuate the state and see it as a natural thing, while governance is contingent on the processes that create it on the one hand and undermine it on the other. States, too, are processes, like cities. Of course, once a territorial configuration is created, and you create walls around it, like legal ones governing migration and capital flows, you create an institution that can in turn influence the process by which it is created and constituted. That implies that while states do well as an institution, power is always unstable, even internal to the state. More interesting is how class power can wield its influence and at what scale. In order to understand these kinds of processes, one has to 'jump scales' as geographers call it.

For instance, when Margaret Thatcher came to power, she found herself faced with very strong socialist municipalities – in response, she basically dissolved the municipal level of government. This, in turn, created chaos in British government, and now they're trying to create some new form of regional government configurations. The conservatives tried this before, by setting up a Greater London Council, but the big joke was that Ken Livingstone won, upon which Margaret Thatcher decided to abolish the Council. This illustrates the dialectics of such processes, the intense struggle that goes on to determine whose interests will prevail. And this kind of struggle goes on at any level class actors seem fit, be it the city, state or region.

The European Union is for me very much the temporary outcome of a neoliberal agenda. They wanted a larger geographical unit to work in with capital, and got it. In the current crisis, European politicians all admit that there is no political integration, just economical, which is why they can't manage the crisis but nationally. The European Central Bank is mandated to fight inflation (and not, for instance, unemployment), is a powerful actor now – and it serves a capitalist logic of power, not a territorial one.

Sweden forms another example: bourgeois capitalist classes there wanted to turn Sweden into a neoliberal, but independent, state. Once they found out that there was too much domestic resistance to this project, they decided to promote Sweden's becoming part of Europe, which essentially gave them what they wanted – a neoliberal Sweden – overstepping domestic resistance by acting on another political stage.

At what scale do you govern and why? Another example of why the interstate-level is not sufficient, is 'acid deposition', which refers to where industrial waste lands. The city of London at some point decided to get rid of the famous smog by building higher smoke-stacks. Subsequently, the Swedish found out that this acid rain was now destroying the ecosystem of their famous lakes. The question then arises: is Britain responsible for what happens in Sweden? If so then the problem (and the British solution) exceeds the existing scale of governance and some other way of dealing with these issues has to be found. This creates new international relations forming around new issues, on different scales. The current fiscal crisis is a case in point of the 'scale-jump' we're living through, because the only real actors are central bankers worldwide – national assemblies have nothing to say and simply have to eat what central bankers serve them as the most feasible solution. Central bankers are dictators because there's no democracy control or constraint whatsoever over their decision making. Nation-states do not seem to want to recognize what's going on, so they are powerless. The environmental movement is, in my view, currently one of the view entities that seem to understand how to work with multi-level governance, simply because a local ecological problem is almost always interrelated to global dynamics. And they seem to be able to deal with local government, nation-states and international institutions alike.

You've mentioned the Marxist concept of 'class' a few times. How should one conceptualize 'classes' nowadays?

First of all, a 'class' is not a concept, but a process. Since the 70s, we're in a process of restructuration of the relationship between society and economy, and classes change with that. In order to define at one point in time someone as forming part of a specific class, one has to look at where an individual stands in relationship to the dynamics of the accumulation of capital – and most people have ambiguous positions: if you have a pension in a bank in an advanced capitalist country right now, you're terrified you'll lose your retirement. So your interest is then in the revival of the system. On the other hand, you're also being victimized by what I call 'accumulation by dispossession': the state, companies, whoever, is constantly taking away things from individuals. An example which might seem normal is that in London, one has to 'shopping' all by oneself: selecting your groceries, checking them out, paying, is all manually done by the client. Fifty years ago, everything would be done by the grocer. So the client uses up a lot more of

its time while the company spends less on labor. This means that classes are constantly on the move, and most individuals rarely represent one single interest throughout their whole lives. Class politics is thus about recognizing the ambivalent positions most of us have, to discuss if and how we want to put checks on the processes of capital accumulation.

Could the current financial crisis be interpreted as a symptom of the decline of the 'American Empire'?

John Gray, whom I disagree with on almost anything, rightly indicated that this event is as significant as the collapse of the Soviet Union. There's no question that this crisis has been a very severe hit upon American hegemony within the structure of imperialisms. That is, there are and have always been multiple imperialisms: a European one, an American one, a Japanese one and a Chinese one – the ambitions of these latent empires might be subdued by the excess of power of one of its competitors, but they're always there, and they are conflicting. And right now we are in the midst of a shift towards a new balance in the international imperialist system, a sort of 'structural adjustment', to adopt an economic term. The clear American capitalist imperialist center which existed, say, in the 50s and 60s has gradually been questioned, and undermined by financial crises. We're now approaching the end-point of this mono-imperialism. This may, however, not be such a good thing at all, because multi-polar competition between imperialisms can cause a lot of damage, as history has proven. When there is a clear center of power, you may not like what is being done, but at least you know where things are at and who is in charge – with multiple power configurations that are potentially in conflict with each other, messages are easily manipulated and tension in the system rises while cooperation decreases. The world will be changing rapidly and radically over the coming 15-20 years.

Last question. You were at one point the 'Mackinder professor' at Oxford. What's the current value of the work of the classical geopolitical thinker [Halford John Mackinder](#), who so famously stated that 'who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world'?

Mackinder. He was one of the first to connect politics to geography, as your quote shows, and for that he owes credit. However, Mackinder is a very clear example of someone who puts his work in service of the territorial logic of power. He was, after all, a British politician concerned with the decreasing English hegemony: in the context of decreasing capital flows directed at the British Empire, Mackinder conceived of a geopolitical theory that was based on the logic of geographical domination in order to control capital flows. However, Mackinder is also a tragic figure, because the quote you picked was at once his greatest fear and Germany's greatest dream, and formed part of the rationalization and inspiration for their conquest of East Europe.

There's already a faint recognition Mackinder's work that there is such a thing as a logic of capital that has to be protected, that one has to secure the West against the rest, and to secure Britain against the West. As such, he forms the source of inspiration for thinkers such as Samuel

Huntington. And while I am completely dismissive of his work, it represents in its clarity of statement a very good example of what powerful states really want – something one should understand in order to understand world politics.

David Harvey is the Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at the City University of New York. He is the worlds most cited academic geographer and one of the most cited social scientists. His political, and Marxist, approach to urbanization has widely inspired debate. Amongst his major publications are *Explanation in Geography* (1969); *Social Justice and the City* (1973); *The New Imperialism* (2003); and *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (2003).

Related links

- [Harvey's faculty profile at the City University of New York](#)
- See the video's, or listen to the audio, of *Reading Marx's Capital with David Harvey* [here](#)
- See an interview with David Harvey [here](#) at Harry Kreisler's *Conversations with History* (2004)
- Read Harvey's lecture *Possible Urban Worlds* (2004) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Harvey's *Neoliberalism and the Restoration of Class Power* [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Harvey's *The Geography of Class Power* (1998) [here](#) (pdf)