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## Social justice and the city and the problem of status quo theory

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### ABSTRACT

This essay reflects on how *Social Justice and the City* remains important not only for introducing social justice and Marxism to geography, but also, and maybe perhaps especially, for its analysis of and attack on *status quo* theory (of which much justice theorizing was, and perhaps remains, a primary example).

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The publication of *Social Justice and the City* (Harvey, 2009, hereafter *SJTC*) 50 years ago marked a turning point, not just in the career of David Harvey but in Anglophonic human geography as a whole. As is well known, besides announcing ‘social justice’ as a primary focus for human geography research, the book charts Harvey’s intellectual and political journey from a kind of high-modernist, social-welfarist, Keynesian liberalism to an incipient Marxism, announcing along the way that ‘liberal formulations’ seeking to advance social justice, with their focus on efficiency and rational planning, but refusal to question the basic underpinnings of society, are doomed to failure, doomed to merely upholding, rather than transforming the unjust *status quo*. Instead, Harvey advocates ‘socialist formulations,’ whose primary objective – expressed in ‘a crude but exuberant way’ – is to ‘reformulate problems as solutions and solutions as problems’ (*SJTC*, p. 18, see also p. 130). In the pages that follow, I will argue that it is just this attack on *status quo* theory that is perhaps *SJTC*’s most enduring contribution, and a key reason why it continues to stand the test of time.

Not all human geographers were ready to follow Harvey down his Marxist path, of course, but many at the time were quite happy to jettison the ‘*status quo* theory’<sup>1</sup> that dominated the discipline – perhaps best exemplified by *both* the long shadow that Richard Hartshorne’s *The Nature of Geography* (1939) cast over the discipline *and* the entanglements of the quantitative revolutionaries with the military-industrial complex and a kind of soulless, people-less (cf. Hagerstränd, 1970), rationalist planning that valued order and efficiency above all else. Some of those revolutionaries, most prominently Bill Bunge (1971), took to the streets, inventing a kind of ‘people’s geography’ long before Harvey (1984) thought to advocate for it. Others turned to various strands

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of phenomenology, existentialism, socialist feminism, and anarchism in their desire to understand how the *status quo* solutions to problems were themselves the source of the primary problems that confront us. Such efforts were, of course, caught up in the currents of the day: the civil rights struggles and urban unrest that marked the 1960s, the antiwar activism that continued into the 1970s, the ‘Third Worldism’ and anti-imperialism that rocked university campuses, the birth of the modern environmental movement, the third wave of feminism, and (it would later become clear) the cultural ‘sea change’ that would eventually be named ‘postmodernism’ (Harvey, 1989; cf. Mitchell, 2023b).

Perhaps more than any other book, *SJTC* has endured as a testament to those times of searching intellectual and political experimentation within academic geography and cognate fields, and is now often read primarily as source material in the history of geography. Legions of beginning post-graduate students are introduced to the book as an artifact, much as, on the fiftieth anniversary of its publication in 1989, I was introduced to Hartshorne’s *Nature* when I began my PhD studies: ‘if you want to understand where geography has come *from*, then you’ve got to at least *look* at this book.’ *SJTC* is a disciplinary milestone, now part of the cannon as much for what it represents as for what it says.

Yet for anyone who actually does read it, the book says a lot – often freshly and originally – even after 50 years, as the contributions to this symposium attest. Its freshness resides in good part in its ‘crudeness’ (even if, as readers struggle with its often highly abstract language, its ‘exuberance’ is sometimes hard to find). Harvey is clear that many of the ideas in the book are only partly worked out, first forays into new and for him (as well as for many of us who have followed in his footsteps) eye-popping ways of understanding how the geographic world is *produced* and *reshaped*. These ‘new’ ideas – Marx’s ideas – were, of course, a 100 years old when Harvey set about trying to understand them, but they were certainly new to geography. And geography (as a field) was new to *them*. There is, no doubt, a geography at the heart of Marx’s *Capital* (and his other work), but, unlike with sociology, history, philosophy, and even anthropology, there had never before been a tradition of ‘Marxist geography.’ *SJTC* marks its birth – or perhaps rather its gestation, since even here Harvey is not yet calling his work ‘Marxist’ but rather ‘socialist.’

I read the book for the first time twenty-five years after it was published (in tandem with reading *The Urbanization of Injustice* [Swyngedouw & Merrifield, 1997] which was published to mark that occasion), in the midst of intense debates concerning whether ‘totalizing discourses’ (of which Marxism was exhibit A) and ‘universal’ concepts (like justice) had any intellectual and political validity whatsoever (cf. Mitchell, 2001), and after I had read (several times) Harvey’s – and geography’s – masterpiece, *The Limits to Capital* (1982). And what struck me most then, and still strikes me now another 25 years on, is the road Harvey takes to get to his Marxism.

As he writes (rather bloodlessly) in his opening sentences, having completed *Explanation in Geography* (1969), ‘I felt it important and appropriate to explore how ideas in social and moral philosophy ... could be related to geographical enquiry and to those fields of intellectual endeavor, such as planning and regional science, with which geography has much in common’ (*SJTC*, p. 9). He had just moved to Baltimore in the United States and ‘it seemed appropriate to use that city together with other cities with which I was familiar, as a backdrop against which to explore questions that arose

from projecting social and moral philosophical considerations into the traditional matrix of geographical enquiry' (p. 9). *SJTC* was, it seems, a purely intellectual project, at least to start. But Baltimore was on fire. The riots that wracked America cities in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination had devastated whole districts of the city. Deindustrialization was already making a deep and lasting mark. Poverty, racism, and their associated illnesses, including drug addiction and high rates of violence, were deeply entrenched. And it was just this massive and rapid destruction of a city that Harvey was now calling home that prompted his turn to Marx, his turn to understanding how 'solutions' really are problems. But it is a long and difficult path to get there.

It begins with a reformist assault on the liberal, rationalist, high-modernist, efficiency-optimizing precinct of Regional Science (often announced with authoritatively capitalized first letters) – reformist because the first chapter of *SJTC* (first published in the *Papers of the Regional Science Association* [Harvey, 1970]) was really only a continuation and mild reconsideration of a number of themes, most particularly concerning the ontological properties of space, already aired in *Explanation*. Here, Harvey's primary goal is to theorize space as *social*, not only physical, and thereby show how 'space is not as simple as the physicists or the philosophers of science would have us believe. If we are to understand space, we must consider its symbolic meaning and its complex impact upon behaviour as it is mediated by the cognitive process' (*SJTC*, p. 36). In turn, such an understanding throws into question the validity of the kinds of location theory that drove regional science and which had to assume space as an infinite plane, without which 'the social process equilibrium point ... cannot be determined' (*SJTC*, p. 48).

Harvey's point, as he begins to make clear in his second chapter, is that any *redistributive* politics – perhaps of a kind that might feel utterly necessary to address Baltimore's woes – becomes all the more difficult when space is understood to be as it really is (social, built, full of inertia) rather than as the abstracted infinitude that any number of distributive models assumes it to be. Redistributive policies are much harder to accomplish in the unevenly produced real world than in the dimensionless world of an IBM mainframe. Exhaustive (and exhausting) as this second chapter is, with its long disquisitions on the distribution of jobs, housing, and real income, the decisive role of property rights in shaping supposedly free markets, the role of power and knowledge, the nature of public goods, and much, much more, what remains striking about the chapter is what it does not talk about: namely, justice – or for that matter, *injustice*. These notions only lurk in the margins, hinted-at results of otherwise rational processes of (re)distribution, but not at all part of the analysis. It is not even clear, no matter how many times one reads the chapter, that Harvey is even yet *interested* in whether the processes and results that he is examining lead to just or unjust outcomes: he seeks only to explain the internal (distributive) logic leading to those outcomes. A *less* normative argument, written by an incipient radical, in the midst of geography's normative revolution, might be hard to find.

Which, perhaps, Harvey himself understood. *SJTC* is after all a record of Harvey's evolution as a political as well as a geographical thinker. And so it is not until Chapter 3 that the normative point is finally named. 'Social justice and spatial systems' is what the chapter is called and it is largely what it sets out to understand. In hindsight (and indeed in Harvey's own estimation in the second half of the book), what is so surprising about this chapter is exactly just how *status quo* its theories are. The definition of social

justice offered is largely borrowed from the high priest of liberal justice theorizing, John Rawls (1971): a just distribution, justly arrived at. Harvey's direct engagement with Rawls is surprisingly scant, however. References to Rawls himself are few and there are none at all to the burgeoning debates to which his *A Theory of Justice* immediately gave rise.<sup>2</sup> For Rawls, the means to justly arrive at a just distribution is (rather contradictorily) to first set people 'free' at the beginning of time – and in the absence of any knowledge whatsoever of the structure of society, their individual place within that society, their relative skills and infirmities, and their priority in receiving the goods (and ills) of society – and then let them rationally decide how to divide the pool of social goods needed for a good life. But yet, secondly, to insist that any such free, rational decision-making be guided by two inviolable principles: that basic liberties be available to all (and sacrosanct) and that any deviation from an equal distribution is only justifiable – is only just – when it benefits the least well-off in society.<sup>3</sup> Even before his socialist/Marxian damascene moment, though, Harvey clearly has little patience for this sort of idealist thought-experiment. Rather, for him (and this is perhaps the key contribution of this first part of *SJTC*), a *justly-arrived at* distribution can only be a *territorially-just* distribution. But here he hardly strays far from Rawls.

For Rawls, the only just deviation from an equal distribution of goods, offices, power, and so forth, is one that benefits the 'least advantaged'. For Harvey a just distribution can only be guaranteed if 'the mechanisms [of distribution] (institutional, organizational, political and economic) should be such that the prospects of the least advantaged territory are as great as they possibly can be' (*SJTC*, pp. 116–117). In some ways this is an extraordinary result. Earlier in the chapter Harvey asks '[a]mong whom or what are we distributing' (p. 99). And, true to his 'liberal formulations', he declares that the 'whom' 'is the human individual' and that his theory of justice will only concern 'groups, organizations, territories, and so on' as a matter of 'convenience' (p. 100). Over the course of 16 or 17 pages, nonetheless, Harvey slips from individuals to territories without really justifying the move. Indeed, in the midst of making this 'slip' he criticizes Rawls's for making a similar move – slipping from the individual to what Rawls called 'the basic structure' – while failing to recognize that this move means 'that the only hope for achieving Rawls's objective would be to ensure that the least fortunate always has the final say' (p. 109). Under these conditions, according to Harvey, 'from Rawls's original position it is not difficult by a fairly simple logical argument to arrive at a "dictatorship of the proletariat" type solution' to the problem of unfair distributions, but it is impossible to 'arrive at the liberal or socialist solution' (p. 109). And yet, by making essentially the same move – only substituting 'territory' for 'basic structure' – Harvey arrives precisely at *his* liberal solution, even if he tries to temper it by acknowledging that there is a real danger of only 'achiev[ing] a tacit endorsement of the *status quo*' unless we commit ourselves to 'making difficult ethical and moral decisions concerning the rights and wrongs of certain principles and justifying claims upon the scarce product of society' (p. 118).

With that, Harvey closes his 'liberal formulations'. What is perhaps most striking about the 'socialist formulations' that follow is that there is simply no explicit discussion of justice at all. Rather, as he explains in the last chapter of the book (which he calls a 'synthesis'):

Concepts of social justice also have to be considered as being both produced by and producers of social conditions. The abstracted analysis of social justice in chapter 3 is *tacitly* transformed in chapter 6 into an examination of how the sense of value which underlies the sense of social justice arises under the conditions of egalitarian, rank and stratified societies and how these conceptions can, when transformed into a dominant ideology, contribute to the support and maintenance of the social relationships within a mode of production. (p. 300, emphasis added)

In other words, much, maybe most, justice theory is *status quo* theory, which goes a long way to clarifying what I think is his primary contribution in the second part of the book (aside, of course, from his introduction of Marxist categories of analysis, like use- and exchange-value, fixed capital, and so forth). It is his important, but I think rather under-appreciated, argument that the task of radical scholars is *not* to offer ‘better’ analyses and explanations of the current reality, but rather to help make *status quo* theories of that reality *not true*.<sup>4</sup>

Let me explain. Harvey’s ‘socialist formulations’ start rather curiously. They begin with a long, at times meandering essay, advocating the development of ‘revolutionary theory’.<sup>5</sup> When I first seriously studied *SJTC* twenty-five years ago, my expectation, as a self-proclaimed radical, was that this essay would be about just that: theory that helped advance revolutionary causes. Instead, the essay is an effort to reconceptualize Thomas Kuhn’s (1962) overly-idealist account of revolutions in scientific thought, tested against *status quo* and counter-revolutionary theories of ‘ghetto formation’. Counter-revolutionary theories are sneaky, because they often are expressed as the best of intentions: ‘mapping even more evidence of man’s patent inhumanity to man is counter-revolutionary,’ Harvey writes (*SJTC*, p. 144), ‘in the sense that it allows the bleeding-heart liberal in us to pretend we are contributing to a solution when in fact we are not.’<sup>6</sup> *Status quo* theories are pernicious: they are always and forever ‘either true or false’ and never only considered “‘true” ... at a given point in time and, in any case, [subject to being] contradicted by other “true” statements’ (p. 130). Revolutionary theory – and therefore radical practice – is different. Take, as Harvey does, ‘the problem of ghetto formation’:

Our objective is to eliminate ghettos. Therefore, the only valid policy with respect to this objective is to eliminate the conditions which give rise to the truth of the theory. In other words, we wish the von Thünen theory of the urban land market to become *not true*. The simplest approach here is to eliminate those mechanism which serve to generate the theory. (p. 137)

To me, this is indeed the most telling, and most lasting, contribution of *SJTC*. It radically transforms our understanding of both the sources of theory (whether of the revolutionary, counter-revolutionary, or *status quo*) type, wresting them out of the idealist, positivist Kuhnian world where theories arise from the clash of ideas themselves and seek merely to explain the world, to one where theories arise out of the world in which they are embedded and seek to explain the world so it may be transformed, so that the very conditions that make theories that *do* explain an unjust world – and help to produce it – become no longer true.

If anything marks the past 50 years of theoretical ferment in geography, it has been precisely the remaking of the discipline into one dedicated to using the power of ideas, the power of theory, to contest the world as it is and to make the theories that

support that world as it is not true. To be sure, counter-revolutionary and *status quo* theories abound in our discipline, but the theoretical cutting-edge is not with them. The rise of abolitionist and Black geographies, together with geography's redoubled focus on the problem of social reproduction, to take perhaps the most obvious (and in many ways also the most crucial) examples, are nothing if not a stark effort radically to remake the *status quo* such that the *status quo* theories that support it – concerning, for example, the way we understand and address crime and imprisonment, the ongoing development of policy out of understandings of race as being rooted in culture and biology rather than power and white supremacy, and the ‘common-sense’ that we simply ‘cannot afford’ decent, socially-supported systems of social reproduction.<sup>7</sup> *Social Justice and the City* helped launch geography's still developing (and still massively incomplete) assault on *status quo* theory and it is now my estimation that that assault – far more than its rather truncated discussions of social justice, or its reorientation of urban theory away from questions of efficiency and optimality to questions of use- and exchange-value – is its crucial and enduring value.

## Notes

1. ‘*Status quo theory* – a theory which is grounded in the reality it seeks to represent ... [b]ut by having ascribed a universal truth status to the propositions it contains, it is capable of yielding prescriptive policies which can result only in the perpetuation of the *status quo*’ (*SJTC*, p. 150). For Harvey, and despite the title of the chapter from which this quotation is derived (‘Revolutionary and counter-revolutionary theory in geography and the problem of ghetto formation’), *status quo* theory poses a bigger danger to revolutions in thought (and practice) than does counter-revolutionary theory which has as its main goal to ‘be-cloud and obfuscate’ and ‘divert attention’ (pp. 150–151). Counter-revolutionary thought can be opposed. It is a lot harder to shift the dead weight of the *status quo*.
2. For a fuller accounting of Rawls's influence – both as inspiration and as a target to be argued against – in justice theorizing across the social sciences, see the chapters in Ohlsson and Przybylinski (2023); for an assessment of geographers' one-sided engagement with Rawls (an engagement that ignores perhaps his most important *substantive* concept, ‘the basic structure’) see Mitchell (2023a).
3. Smith (1994) has an excellent, critical discussion of Rawls's theory. Clark (1986) offers a still insightful critique of Rawls's ‘original position’ thought experiment.
4. For one appreciation of the point, see Clark (2014).
5. This chapter was originally published a year earlier in *Antipode* (Harvey, 1972), together with a series of still fascinating commentaries both seconding and contesting his arguments. It is not unreasonable, as Chris Philo has suggested to me, to date the birth of Marxist geography to this issue. To the degree that is the case, however, I think the midwife is more Steen Folke's (1972) response to Harvey, than Harvey's essay itself. See Gutzen Larsen (2022).
6. For a fascinating examination of just this sentence, and what it means for understanding the work of ‘welfare geographers’ like David Smith and – after a fashion and a generation later – Danny Dorling, as well as the sort of activist geography Bunge launched in Detroit, see Philo (2014).
7. The most obvious, and most important, reference here is, of course Gilmore (2022).

## Disclosure statement

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