

David Harvey and the Occupy Movement

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The geographer and social theorist David Harvey has acquired a wide following in recent years, especially among students, because of his writings and lectures on Marx's *Capital*.

This is hardly surprising in conditions where the bankruptcy of theoretical thought is so marked that the economist and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman is widely regarded as something of a "left," sometimes even some sort of socialist. Lack of knowledge of Marxist political economy has led to a generally uncritical acceptance of Harvey's work.

An analysis of his writings, going back to his book *Limits to Capital*, first published in 1982 and re-issued in 2006, will show that Harvey falls into the category of those who would seek to accommodate Marx's theories to the existing order. That is, he is one of those who are out to "trim Marx's beard."

This is not the place for a full-scale review of Harvey's work. But his response to the Occupy movement does provide an insight into the foundations of his political economy. On the theoretical front, his work is characterised by the attempt to find some means by which the contradictions of capitalism, which Marx demonstrated created the objective conditions for its overthrow, can at least be ameliorated, if not overcome.

This theoretical outlook finds expression in Harvey's intervention into the Occupy movement, where he advances the perspective that vigorous protests can be utilised to curb some of capitalism's worst excesses.

More than 150 years ago, Marx insisted that it was necessary to distinguish between the working class, whose interests lay in transforming the whole of society, and the "democratic petty bourgeois [who] ... only aspire to a change in social conditions which will make the existing society as tolerable and comfortable for themselves as possible." Harvey speaks for the latter.

In a comment published on October 28, entitled "Rebels on the Street: The Party of Wall Street Meets its Nemesis," Harvey denounces the "absolute power of money to rule absolutely." These are hardly new insights. After all, it was Mark Twain who said "there is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress" and "we have the best Congress money can buy."

Marxists always seek to expose "money politics" and reveal the real workings of parliamentary democracy. Yet Marxism goes

much further, explaining that even the most democratic bourgeois republic is, in the final analysis, a political form for the dictatorship of finance capital.

In "normal times" the petty bourgeois politicians and the union bureaucracies work to cover over this truth as they promote the myths and illusions of the "democratic process." The financial crisis and the response of governments around the world, however, have torn aside the veil of "democracy" to reveal the real situation.

Across the United States, the multi-trillion dollar bailout of the banks and financial institutions at the expense of the jobs and livelihoods of the broad mass of the working people, the ruthless assault on wages—spearheaded by the Obama administration in the auto industry—and the massive cuts to all levels of public service are an historic political experience. They have established as an indisputable fact of political life that, to use Marx's words, "the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie."

In Europe, what remains of parliamentary democracy has been virtually dispensed with in Greece and Italy with the appointment of "technocratic" governments, headed by former employees of US banks, to impose the dictates of finance capital for the impoverishment of the working class.

These experiences have been registered in the consciousness of millions of people. They powerfully underscore the veracity of the Marxist analysis that the dictatorship of finance capital cannot be ended through the bourgeois parliamentary system but only through the coming to power of a workers' government, at the head of a mass socialist movement. Such a government must take control of the "commanding heights" of the economy and bring the finance houses, banks and giant corporations into public ownership under democratic control so that economic resources can be used for the benefit of society as a whole.

At times, such a perspective may have seemed somewhat alien and distant to all but the most politically conscious sections of the working class and the broader working population. Today, after the experiences of the past four years, it can be comprehended by millions. Right at this point, Harvey intervenes to try to bolster the worst illusions in the present political regime.

Harvey's perspective is not the overthrow of the present dictatorship of finance capital, but the development of a movement

to pressure its representatives to “listen.” With all other channels of expression closed by “money power,” he writes, the movement has “no other option except to occupy the parks, squares and streets of our cities until our opinions are heard and our needs attended to.”

According to Harvey, corporate privileges must be rolled back, public goods such as health care and education must be publicly provided and freely available, monopoly powers in the media ended, the privatisation of knowledge and culture stopped and the freedom to exploit and dispossess others “severely curbed and ultimately outlawed.”

How are these goals to be realised? Harvey writes: “In the face of the organized Party of Wall Street ... the movement that is emerging must take as one of its founding principles that it will neither be divided nor diverted until the Party of Wall Street is brought either to its senses—to see that the common good must prevail over narrow venal interests—or to its knees.”

In other words, for Harvey the essential problem is that the political representatives of finance capital in the Democratic and Republican parties do not understand the enormous damage their policies are causing. The task is to make them see sense.

On the contrary, the leading figures of finance capital and their political servants understand very well that the breakdown of the capitalist economic order, which began with the financial crisis of 2007-2008, means there is no alternative to the impoverishment of the working class in the United States and around the world if the profit system is to be maintained.

Harvey further elaborated his perspective in an address to Occupy London. He made it clear that for him the present crisis does not arise from a breakdown of the capitalist economy but from the adoption of the wrong policies under the neo-liberal agenda. Consequently, what he termed “Thatcherism” could be reversed if only enough pressure were brought to bear.

In the past, Harvey claimed, capital was forced to shoulder some of the costs it imposed on society through taxation which financed public health and education. This was done away with by Thatcher, and her agenda had been continued and deepened by all her successors.

The political perspective of the Occupy movement, he told the London meeting, must be to “end what Thatcher started and reverse it entirely. In other words, what we have to have is a political program to end the whole Thatcher era because it has not ended at all.” The political task before the movement was to “force capital to bear all those costs that it doesn’t want to bear.”

For Harvey this is a well-worn theme. For him neo-liberalism or Thatcherism is not rooted in the objective crisis of capitalism, but a policy that can be reversed. In his books *The New Imperialism* and *A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism*, published in 2003 and

2005 respectively, he called for a new “New Deal,” along the lines of the Roosevelt administration in the 1930s, as a replacement for the neo-conservative agenda of the George W. Bush administration.

Harvey demonstrated at that time that this perspective was developed in direct opposition to the fight for the mobilisation of the working class to overthrow capitalism.

Advocating what he termed “New Deal” imperialism, Harvey wrote: “There are, of course, far more radical solutions lurking in the wings, but the construction of a new ‘New Deal’ led by the United States and Europe, both domestically and internationally ... is surely enough to fight for in the present conjuncture” (*The New Imperialism*, Oxford University Press Oxford, 2003, p. 210).

Eight years on, Harvey’s organic hostility to an independent political struggle of the working class for socialism is undiminished. He advances the prospect that forces can be found from within the present order to advance a new agenda.

Harvey told the Occupy London meeting: “So yes, indeed bring down David Cameron... But there’s a problem with that, which is you would like to think if you bring down David Cameron, there would be someone on the other side who would do what you want to see done, but there’s not. So what we need to do is to start to build a political force that forces someone on the other side to do what you are asking for. Which is: move away from this gross inequality of wealth, take care of the environmental dilemmas, and do something radically different to end Thatcherism.”

There is no mistaking Harvey’s orientation. In Britain, the Occupy movement should be subordinated to some “left” in the Labour Party, while in the US it must come under the wing of the Democratic Party. These are the very forces responsible for the imposition of the austerity agenda of the bourgeoisie.

Harvey has built up a reputation as an analyst of Marxist political economy and a sharp critic of capitalism. He is now using this political capital to try to emasculate the Occupy movement and subordinate it to the present political order, and thereby to the dictatorship of finance capital itself.



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