

Response Paper: David Harvey – “Contested Cities: Social Process and Spatial Form”

In his essay “Contested Cities: Social Process and Spatial Form” which was featured in Jewson’s and MacGregor’s book *Transforming Cities* (1997), David Harvey emphasizes the fundamental importance of the city as a process in social, political, economic and ecological spheres. Harvey uses a classic three-part essay, with a brief introduction and conclusion. In his introduction, he underlines the massive urbanization that took place during the last century and therefore provides an interesting way to open the theme, while already proving its current relevance. He continues this theme in the first paragraph of the body, where he criticizes the neglect of urban processes as a factor in discussions, especially in contrast to the increase in urban population. In his argument, Harvey ascribes this lack of interest to the receding incentive of capital regarding the city, which is no longer of the same importance as it was during the industrialization. While I agree with his evaluation in general, I found the opening of his argument to be out of place considering the overall theme of the essay: “If we think about the likely qualities of life in the next century by projecting forward current trends in our cities, most commentators would end up with a somewhat dystopian view.” (p. 232) Although he emphasizes that he is projecting a hypothetical scenario, I still believe this stiff vision of the future does not coincide with his argument of the city as an ever-changing process, which becomes an important item in the second part of the body. This second part functions as a methodological basis, where he explains why he believes that we have to start understanding time and space in a relational way, since they are dialectically shaping each other. Here his argument is concise and easy to follow, while it furthermore seems structurally reasonable to follow a first paragraph about the relevance of the question with one about the methodology. Beyond that, the last paragraph of the body is the most interesting in my opinion, since David Harvey gets more concrete and formulates his aim as “liberat[ing] emancipatory processes of social change.” (p. 235) Furthermore, his main focus in this part are current challenges regarding designed communities. Thereby, Harvey argues that for a long time there has been a notion that “proper design of things would solve all the problems in the social process.” (p. 235)

However, he opposes this believe strongly and insist, that real communities need to be cultivated, sustained, and based on a broad set of common values. This argument instantly evoked thoughts of gated communities and how they lead to a reduced diversity due to racist biases and the required financial means. Since I always perceived those “communities” as people living together in solitude, Harvey’s argument revealed wherein exactly the problem lies. In his short conclusion, David Harvey then urges the reader to contest different myths, wherein he sums up the main points of his argument, while this part can also serve as a call to action. Overall, I believe that Harvey’s text “Contested Cities: Social Process and Spatial Form” is an excellently structured essay, which is based mostly on comprehensible and well thought-out arguments, with the one exception I critiqued in the first paragraph of the body.