Interview with Prof. David Harvey (2014)

It is our pleasure to share the interview we conducted with Prof. David Harvey at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul in 2014, who kindly accepted our request to meet. Due to some unexpected circumstances, it is our fault that this interview has been published quite late. We sincerely apologize for the delay. It would certainly have been ideal to make this interview accessible at a time when we were all intensely reflecting on the Gezi Movement. However, despite the delay, it is possible to say that both the questions and Harvey's answers still offer relevant insights. This is not a set of short questions and easy answers. We hope that this effort contributes to a broader understanding of the global context we all inhabit.

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On behalf of the Boğaziçi University Political Economy Reading Group and Committee, July 2014

Your views on the neoliberal process of urbanization are well known in academic and intellectual circles. When you think about this form of urbanization and the reactions of the new urban population to it across the world, where do you locate last year's Gezi Protests in Turkey? More or less similar revolts have been observed in several countries in recent years. Some were triggered by fiscal crises and austerity policies, as in Greece; others were framed as more directly related to political rights and democratic governance, as in Egypt. What, in your view, are the commonalities?

I don't have a definitive theory about that. I think this is a question that remains very much open for discussion. It clearly does not seem accidental that we are witnessing so many eruptions of this kind around the world. There have been earlier periods in history when simultaneous outbreaks of discontent occurred—1968, for example. But it is always very difficult to pinpoint exactly what brings these movements together. My own way of approaching this is to focus on what I call "universal alienation." Many people feel alienated from the political process; they feel excluded from opportunities for economic advancement; they feel dispossessed. These general conditions can be observed across different cases. But the question remains: why does this sense of exclusion suddenly erupt?

In the case of Gezi, there was something very specific. If you look at the protests in Brazil in June and July, again, there were specific issues—indeed, several different issues—that converged. Similarly, in London, the flare-up was triggered by very specific instances of police repression, brutality, and the arbitrary killing of a suspect. So in each case, the trigger differs. But then we must ask: why does that trigger lead to such an explosion? A second question is: when such an explosion occurs, what forces come together to shape it? This varies across different contexts, depending partly on the issue and partly on the extent of underlying discontent. For example, in Brazil, to what extent did working-class groups participate? To what extent did they remain on the sidelines? In the Occupy movement in New York, it seems to me that the movement did not succeed in mobilizing sufficient working-class support. Some support existed, but never enough, because much of the discontent was articulated in a kind of anarchist language rather than in terms of social justice.

In Egypt, while the initial trigger was political, there had already been significant discontent among the working class. There had been strikes in factories before Tahrir Square happened, and many working-class people joined the movement. Each case must therefore be understood in its specificity. But beyond that, there is a general condition: capital does not serve people very well. The state apparatus is closely aligned with capital, as Marx described it, as the executive committee. And we see democracy corrupted by money power—something that is true almost everywhere you go. So the commonalities are there. But the specifics are always specific, especially when it comes to who joins a movement and who does not. That very often depends on how discourse arises out of the movement: who finds that language appropriate for expressing their particular anger, and who feels alienated by it. For instance, in the Occupy movement in New York, immigrant groups that had been struggling on their own felt alienated by some of the language utilized—this was not their struggle—so they did not come forward.

You would have to tell me more about who joined Gezi Park and who did not. I do think it was a wonderful moment when Beşiktaş supporters joined in. That signals that something different is going on. The question is: what common language emerges from groups joining together in such a diversity of forces?

In your talks, you frequently use examples of neoliberal attacks on the working class in both advanced and developing capitalist countries. In what ways do these attacks differ in developing countries like India, Turkey, or Brazil? What changes have occurred in the composition of the working class in recent decades in both advanced and developing countries, particularly in relation to technological shifts and the expansion of the service sector?

Yeah, well, one of the reasons I am interested in the idea of uneven geographical development is to move beyond the notion that there is a unified, simple version of neoliberalism that is everywhere the same. Neoliberalism, and neoliberal strategies and tactics, are clearly deployed through state apparatuses, sometimes supported or pushed by international institutions like the IMF, or, in the European case, through the imposition of austerity measures on Greece by the troika. So the dynamics of neoliberalization vary a great deal from one country to another. Likewise, the degree of resistance, and the effectiveness of that resistance, can vary greatly from one place to another. The power relations differ as well: to what degree does the IMF have the power to insist that, in return for being bailed out of its debt problems, a particular country implement neoliberal reforms? This began in Mexico in 1983 and then continued in many other cases.

In Chile, of course, it followed an internal coup. Then, eventually, Chile embraced neoliberalism about two or three years after the coup, when Pinochet turned to the Chicago Boys. He did not go to Chicago; rather, Chileans had been trained there, because the U.S. had long pursued a policy of extending imperial influence through scholarship programs that enabled people to study in the United States. Many economists in Latin America were trained in the U.S. through these programs, and they returned to their countries schooled in neoliberal orthodoxy from the very beginning. That was very specific to what happened in many Latin American countries.

But then, of course, in Latin America, after more than a decade—what is now often called a lost decade of development—there was a broad move toward an anti-neoliberal stance. But it was a soft anti-neoliberalism, not really radical. That is very different from what happened in India, which resisted neoliberalism until the late 1990s and then instituted a kind of dynamic neoliberal reform in a situation

where there was still a very large peasant population. India was dealing with a demographic situation that was really quite different. So the unfolding of neoliberal practices and policies in India looked very different from what might be seen elsewhere.

And then the question becomes: what are we calling China? Neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics? They call it socialism with Chinese characteristics. So I think the uneven geographical development of neoliberalism has been very significant to its diffusion around the world. In effect, different countries experiment with certain aspects of neoliberalization, and to the degree that those experiments turn out to be successful, they become part of the common sense of what neoliberalism should look like. The Chilean model, for example, became very important because it worked very well, at least for a few years before it collapsed in 1982. The British model, again, did not work in pure form, and so what emerged was a pragmatic adaptation of neoliberalization that differed from the theoretical apparatus in the minds of Margaret Thatcher's key economic advisers.

So what works becomes part of the story of what neoliberalization is about. And the diversity of it, I think, is part of its strength. It is a decentralized strategy, if you like, to induce a form of capitalist development in which the state is reformed. The state is not abolished, as some people like to say; it is actually reformed and made more powerful in certain dimensions. But the state is no longer responsible for social welfare considerations, and there is an increasing emphasis on privatization, while a considerable shift toward financialization becomes the dominant form of capital accumulation. So it was different in the U.S., different elsewhere—it was almost a decentered adaptation of certain ideas about how the state should operate.

But what is the commonality? One of the things you have to do is suppress working-class power as much as you can, raise the level of exploitation of labor as fast and as strongly as possible, and reform the tax system in such a way as to get away from progressive taxation and, if possible, move toward regressive forms of taxation in which states subsidize corporations while the rich become richer. It is dramatically oriented toward the creation of greater and greater levels of inequality. If you look at the data from most countries—with the exception of a few, particularly in Latin America more recently—distribution has become far more unequal globally than it had been for many years. Many people compare it to the 1920s.

So I think the process of neoliberalization has unfolded in this uneven geographical way, and to the degree that some of the more neoliberalized countries have been competitively successful vis-à-vis others, they force, through competition, the further diffusion of neoliberal practices and policies. That is pretty instructive, and even after the crisis of 2007–08, this did not lead to the overthrow of neoliberal policies and practices throughout much of the world. It actually led to the deepening of those policies and practices. The idea was that there was a successful way out of the crisis: to become even more neoliberal. As a result, the rich have recovered from the crisis very well, and the billionaires' club has become stronger and has, in a way, constructed a global oligarchy—or plutocracy, whatever you want to call it—with tremendous wealth, which they use to pursue their own interests and protect their own privileges.

Mr. Harvey, actually I want to ask the fourth question. It is again about Turkey, but perhaps we may reach some general conclusions about mass movements. During the Gezi Protests we saw a kind of dilemma, and this question is based on two of those dilemmas. First of all, we have already discussed the positioning of the Gezi Protests in Turkey within a larger picture.

However, at this point we want to ask a question that seems quite crucial for us. In Istanbul there are some neighborhoods—namely Sulukule, Gulsuyu, and Sultangazi—where low-income families have been resisting urban transformation and waiting for judicial measures to be taken for a long time. But on the one hand, unlike in the case of the Gezi Protests, the majority of society did not embrace or discuss these struggles. On the other hand, before the Gezi Protests, many people were aware of the construction of the third bridge, but still we did not see any organized reaction. Therefore, do you think that the places to which people have a sense of attachment or belonging constitute a threat or a trap to class struggle?

How do you mean by attachment to places?

You know, Taksim Square is more central than northern Istanbul. So millions or thousands of people visit Taksim in one day, but northern Istanbul is much more remote.

Well, I mean there are a number of things involved. First of all, you know, Lefebvre, for example, made this point about the significance and power of centrality. And of course Gezi Park, Taksim Square, is a symbolic center, in the same way that Tahrir Square is a symbolic center. To occupy a symbolic center is always dramatic in some way. Therefore you enter into the symbolic dimensions of what the struggle is about. And if you can capture an iconic place, as the Occupy movement did on Wall Street, or in London, it always has a greater impact.

I think that, as leftists, if we sit around making a strategic plan about what we are going to do, we would always say we want to do something that has symbolic power, something that wakes people up and draws media attention, something where we are going to be seen by everybody. Whereas if you set up a camp in the northern forest, in the north, nobody will notice. I mean, I can see that. I visited a group occupying a river plain in Diyarbakır. There was a group of young Kurdish militants who had set up a camp to try to stop the cutting down of trees. They were camping in an area far out on the fringes of the city, down in the river plain, and it was much harder to draw attention there. But they were successful, by the way, in stopping the cutting down of the trees.

Again, one of the things we have been seeing is, of course, very volatile eruptions and protests that are rather spontaneous, and there is no kind of permanent organization behind them. If you look at this globally, I mean, go back to 15 February 2003, when millions of people were on the streets of almost every major city around the world protesting the possibility of war. There were about 3 million people in Rome, a couple of million in Madrid, a couple of million in Barcelona, a couple of million in London, and I have no idea how many were in New York, because I was in the protest in New York, and people tried to protest and could not find any place to go, so it was just chaos. If you look at it, millions of people suddenly came out, and then of course they disappeared. You ask: where did they all go? But they came out, and they all went to symbolic centers. Nobody said, "Let's go to the periphery"; they all protested in symbolic centers.

We have seen similar movements, which I mention quite a bit in *Rebel Cities*, such as the immigrant rights marches in the U.S. in 2006, when all of a sudden millions of people were out in the streets of the cities. They really shut down Los Angeles, shut down Chicago, pretty much shut down New York, San Francisco, and so on. And again, there they were in the spring of 2006, and by the fall of 2006 they had disappeared, and no one knew where all those protesters were.

So to protest something like the impact of the third bridge and the destruction of the forest landscape around it, and all of the resources involved, you need a permanent organization. It has to be able to mobilize protest not only up there but also down here, if necessary. And it has to mobilize alliances, create alliances with different groups. One of the reasons we support the idea of the Right to the City is that it tries to find ways to bring together different social movements—against gentrification here, against the destruction of public space there, around rights to the street somewhere else—and to figure out how to put all of that together around the idea that we need a form of social and political organization that can actually take on the city as a whole, rather than merely struggle over the gentrification problem in Brooklyn or a public space issue in Queens.

But it has been very difficult to get right-to-the-city organizations into a position where they can actually make decisions and start thinking about organizing the whole city around very specific issues. I do not know what the answer is here, but when you have entrenched poverty in certain communities and then something like Gezi Park happens, there has to be a way of linking together the people who were involved in Gezi Park with the struggles over impoverishment and displacement that were going on in neighborhoods being gentrified, where people were being forcibly displaced. How do you link all these different issues?

But all of the left these days is very antagonistic to being organized. There is a lot of distrust. This was a difficulty with Occupy: it was so anarchist-inspired that the idea of permanent organization became, "No, we don't want that; we are into a different kind of politics." I think there are limits to this insistence on horizontal organization, and I think this anti-hierarchy ideology, and the antagonism even to thinking about any positive role for the state, reflects the neoliberal ethic in some ways. It is very interesting that almost every governing mode of production and its political articulation generates a certain kind of political subjectivity. In the same way that Fordism generated the union movement and political parties, neoliberalism has generated autonomy, dispersal, anti-authoritarian politics, and anti-statism.

Sometimes when you listen to some people on the left, they sound like the Tea Party. Of course, they would say, "No, no, no, no," but at times it sounds similar. So I think the left has to sit back and think a little bit about what it is doing and what its organizational forms are. I find myself perpetually sympathetic to horizontal forms of organization, and I think they can be very good. The assembly structures that have emerged in some places are really quite innovative and quite powerful. But they are often not big enough or well articulated enough to take on issues like what is going to happen to the forests in the Bosphorus region, or what is going to happen to these impoverished neighborhoods that are under assault.

So this is one of the questions on the left to which I have no answer. I am not an organizer, and I have a hard time organizing myself. But I think what you are asking is a critical question—a question to which the left has to find an answer, otherwise it will fail again, as it did in the 1970s. And this is a moment when it could, I think, mobilize and capture a great deal of the discontent that exists. What I fear is the obvious fact that all of this discontent is now being captured by the fascist right. The left, in a way, has to provide a counterforce to all of that. It will not be able to do so unless it actually thinks about forms of organization that can somehow counter what is emerging and what is now rifling through these movements.

In one of your books, *The New Imperialism*, you explain imperialism as a temporal-spatial fix of capitalism in its effort to find solutions to its own problems. Could you please explain the converging and diverging points between this approach and Lenin's account of imperialism?

There has always been a problem for me in terms of how to reconcile a theory of the exploitation of one class by another with a theory about the exploitation of people in one part of the world by people from another part of the world. What is the relationship between those two? One of the reasons I wanted to specialize in Marx's theory of capital accumulation, and then started to talk about how capital accumulation is necessarily about the production of space, the production of new spaces, the colonization of spaces, and so on, is that it is bound up with these processes. The question is how class privilege gets embedded in that kind of process. So it is a transformation of the exploitation of one class by another into a geographical strategy. That is why I wanted to talk about things like spatial fixes, which concern the way surplus capital gets absorbed.

Lenin picked up on the idea of capital export as being crucial and connected it to all sorts of ideas about monopoly and monopoly capitalism. I do not think it necessarily has to be connected to monopoly capitalism, even though right now he might argue that significant elements of monopoly are around. Certainly, if you look at certain fields like agribusiness, this is very much like what Lenin talked about: monopoly capital out there exploiting the world. Geographically, Monsanto is in India, in Latin America. You can hardly find any other soybeans anymore; they are all Monsanto.

But I think Lenin's construction needed to be made more geographical. At the same time, it involved an oversimplification in treating it as monopoly capitalism. Monopoly exists, but when we begin to look at what is going on between different spaces, we see a great deal of diversity. Giovanni Arrighi, with whom I worked quite a bit, wrote a book in the 1970s called The Geometry of Imperialism, and the main theme of the book was that imperialism is not a very good category. What we should really be looking at are competing hegemonies. There are hegemonic centers, and these shift; therefore there is great fluidity.

I think part of the problem with the concept of imperialism is that we often imagine a fixed center imposing something on the rest of the world. But if you start to look at spatial fixes, you would say: look, toward the end of the 1970s there was a lot of surplus capital in South Korea, so suddenly capital starts to be exported from South Korea around the world. A few years later, the same thing happens with Taiwan.

And if you look at some of the more vicious forms of labor exploitation in Central America and Latin America, you often find Taiwan, Japan, and Korea subcontracting to American and sometimes European firms. More recently, what we have been seeing is a great deal of surplus capital export from China. China is very active in Africa, buying all kinds of resources. So when we look at copper in Zambia, who is exploiting Zambia's copper resources? There are two big companies: one is Chinese, the other is Indian. So what do you say? Is this Indian imperialism? Or Chinese imperialism? Which category do you end up with? There are many imperialisms.

But I am trying to say: look, if you examine it carefully, it is a geographical process. There is no question that Indian mining capital is very strong and very well organized, and it sees the possibility of exploiting copper in Zambia. And Indian capital relates to Zambian elites in exactly the same way that an American

company would: by buying off the elites. So the Zambian elites do very well, but the population does not get much out of this at all...

So I find the concept of imperialism ideologically powerful, but too crude to capture what is going on and the complexity of these relationships. After all, where is Chinese surplus capital invested right now? A great deal of it is invested in the United States. How do we talk about that? It is the export of capital to the U.S. Is the U.S. colonized by China? No, that does not make sense. You have to stop and actually look at competing hegemonies and the fact that the U.S. is borrowing up to the hilt from China and covering its deficits by borrowing from the Chinese. The Chinese, meanwhile, cannot simply stop lending to the U.S. because it is one of their primary markets. If they stopped lending to the U.S., they would damage their own market. So this is the kind of dynamic we are dealing with.

Plainly, there is a kind of hegemonic relationship between the United States and China. It is better to look at it in those terms rather than simply saying that one place is exploiting another and that this is an imperialist imposition. Another problem with the concept of imperialism is that everything gets blamed on imperialism and the IMF in Latin America. Then you turn around and say to people: what about your own elites? The richest person in the world is a Mexican, Carlos Slim. And Mexico has a whole bunch of billionaires. So to blame all the problems in Latin America on imperialism and ignore the fact that ruling classes in these countries are also deeply involved is a mistake. In fact, they love to blame imperialism, because that shifts the spotlight away from what they are doing, how much they are exploiting the country, and places the blame elsewhere. I want to nuance the whole argument about imperialism and these kinds of dynamics.

Do you think that liberal economics' claim to isolate the state from the economy is honest? Where does the state stand in urban and financial economy?

Well, the state and capital have always been, if you like, a contradictory unity. To treat the state as something over there, with only one-way causal arrows running between it and the economy, is the wrong way to conceptualize it. A lot of capital flows through the state apparatus. If you look at it, probably about a third of the economy—perhaps not more—is composed of flows of money going through the state in terms of taxes, grants, and redistribution. So the state is part of the process. Now, the state apparatus is not a unified entity. I have always tried to separate out what I call the state-finance nexus, which we saw very clearly in the crisis of 2008, when two people came on television and told us what was going to happen: the chair of the Federal Reserve—which is a peculiar institution because, although it is licensed by the state, it is actually a private institution and the head of the banking system—and the Secretary of the Treasury.

You saw the chair of the Fed and the Secretary of the Treasury standing side by side and saying, "This is what we are going to do." We did not see the president, we did not see Congress, we did not see anybody else apart from these two. And this was the state-finance nexus in action. Around the world, you can see similar structures. There are also international versions of it, such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the Bank for International Settlements, and so on.

So I think that, to me, the dialectical unity of the state and capital is forged in certain institutional arrangements, and in particular in the state-finance nexus. Consider the formation of the central banks. The first central bank was formed in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, and it was very interesting

because the state needed to borrow money in order to fight wars. The merchant capitalists had the money, and when the state asked them for it, they said: "We will lend it to you if you give us the power to control the currency." That is how the central bank got set up. Merchant capitalists controlled the central bank, while the state chartered the institution and had some power in relation to it. Ever since then, the power of the central bank has been very significant.

If you look at the global situation right now, I think the power of central banks is probably one of the key centers of political and political-economic power. How they work is absolutely crucial for understanding the economy. The European Central Bank is a disastrous institution, and I think it is very clear that it made the crisis deeper and worse than it needed to be because it has a bad constitution. Marx actually had a very interesting analysis of the Bank of England in 1844 and argued that the crisis of 1847–48 was not due to faulty legislation alone—that is, the Bank Act of 1844—but that the Bank Act prolonged and deepened the crisis. I think it is a very interesting analysis of what was wrong with the Bank of England, because it has direct parallels with what is wrong with the European Central Bank.

So I think we should concentrate on those institutional arrangements through which capital operates. Of course, these institutions are not pure and are not insulated from competition. Once you abandon money as a commodity, as capitalists have been doing since the 1970s, then central banks become the institutions that largely determine what money is about. Therefore they are crucial institutions. To me, that is a very important way of looking at the state and capital and at things like their dynamic relationship.

Now that we acknowledge the heterogeneous understanding of what constitutes the proletariat, and that what it has in common is actually urban life—mostly the city—would you suggest that the left imagine a way to bring together people living in the same district, like a community or a committee under the umbrella of municipalities, which would either replace or complement factory committees or occupational unions? Or, if this implies being too embedded "within the system," what other possibilities could we imagine for people living in the same district?

You know, there is a very interesting formulation by Gramsci back in, I think, 1918, in some of his writings, where he was talking about factory councils and all the rest of it. But at some point he said that these units by themselves are not sufficient for organizing; we should supplement the factory committees with what he called ward committees based in the neighborhood. It is a very interesting observation, because whereas from the perspective of factory councils you understand struggles located in a particular sector of the economy, by organizing the neighborhood, the ward, you gain an understanding of what is going on in the working class as a whole, rather than in just one sector of it.

For example—and this is where it gets really interesting—he mentions transport workers, taxi drivers, street cleaners, and so on. He says that from this perspective we would understand the condition of the working class as a whole in ways that we cannot understand from the politics of the factory council. So he was basically arguing that we should put the two together, and that the ward should be organized to the point where it becomes a strong, disciplined political unit that can actually see all kinds of production and everything else connected to it.

I would say that it is a pity that this kind of formulation, which came up in 1918, has generally escaped left thinking. One of the things I found when I went to Oxford was that there were the trade unions, but

then there was something called the Trades Council, which brought together the old trade unions in the city. And the Trades Council was much more radical than the unions. The unions were mainly concerned with the demands of their own membership and not with the working class as a whole, whereas the Trades Council was very much concerned with what was happening to the working class in Oxford as a whole. So it was prepared to organize as much as it could. The trade union movement, by and large, did not pay much attention to the Trades Council, treating it as a marginal institution. We have similar institutions in the U.S., called labor councils, in New York, Baltimore, and elsewhere. But the trade unions that are supposed to support them basically treat them as inferior organizations and therefore not central to what they are about.

I would be very much in favor of going back and creating a more dialectical relationship between workplace organizing and neighborhood organizing, and seeing them as a unity. When you do that, of course—and this again goes back to what Gramsci identifies as significant, namely street cleaners, delivery workers, and so on—you also challenge the tendency on the left to look centrally to factory labor, which has disappeared in many parts of the world. We are still left with a huge working-class population that is building and managing the city.

And there is a theoretical argument here: are the people working in urban life producing value or not? One of the things Marx says about transportation, for example, is essentially that transportation is value-producing. And it also has a very peculiar character, which is that the value is consumed as it is produced. There is a tendency these days to talk about immaterial labor and about Negri's appropriation of Marx's Grundrisse. But actually this kind of labor has always existed in something like transportation.

If you really wanted to organize a massive strike action in, say, New York City, and if you got all the cab drivers and the delivery workers to go on strike, it would stop the city. And pretty soon, somebody would have to negotiate. I have been thinking about this in terms of the power of transport strikes. Some of these struggles by transportation workers and truck drivers go on day after day. In France in the 1990s, there were transport strikes, some of which were, I think, very effective.

So I think that thinking about the potential power to disrupt means going back to some of Rosa Luxemburg's ideas about the general strike, but articulating them in relation to neighborhood organizing. So maybe this is utopian, but if we had a strong right-to-the-city movement, and if that movement were actually mobilizing the city as a whole, it would be in a position to stop the city—as happened in the immigrant marches of 2006. Stopping the city is a very good thing to do politically. Everybody wakes up.

So I think one long-term direction would be more neighborhood organizing, more right-to-the-city organizing, in alliance with unions, to create a radical bloc that is able, to some degree, to dictate the conditions of life and labor that exist in the city, as well as to address questions about medication and health care. This might be a somewhat utopian vision. I do not know if we will ever get there, and that is why it remains vague, but we should be thinking about it.