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Belief, Negotiation and Loyalty

- Économiste, auteur - Méthodes et concepts -



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[1998i] (avec Ana Maria Galano) " **Belief, negotiation and loyalty. A review of David HARVEY, Justice, Nature & the Geography of difference , Routledge, 1996** ". *Antipode*, vol 30 n° 1, January 98.

From its very beginning, David Harvey's book places its readers at the core of a typical social struggle of our time. The workers of a car plant in Oxford, England, try to resist its closure. A group of teachers of the prestigious university decides to back the workers' movement.

Very soon the union leadership and the Labour members of the city council withdraw their support for both the workers' campaign and the research. The latter is then left to a small group of independent researchers aided by dissident shop-stewards and ex-workers of the plant. From then on, David Harvey's attention moves to the conflict among the contributors to *The Factory and the City*, a book about the history of the plant and of the struggle to avoid its closure. Through the evocation of the conflict, David Harvey introduces some of the main themes of *Justice, Nature & the Geography of Difference*.

The fierce debates around the *Factory and the City's* conclusions reveal the existence of different perspectives and interpretations about what nowadays may represent an attitude of loyalty to socialism (or to a certain conception of socialism). To some of the collaborators, all attention should be drawn to the defense of the still existing jobs. To David Harvey, loyalty with the militant shop-stewards still employed should not prevent talking about many more people living in the same industrial district and who did not have any prospect for employment. If it was imperative to defend the existing jobs, one should also point-out the deteriorating work conditions in the plant. The effects of overcapacity in the automobile industry and of the adjustments' consequences on workers' employment and union politics should be recalled. Ecological issues, such as those derived from the plant itself and more largely from automobile as source of pollution had to be considered. It would also be relevant to remember the financial troubles of the enterprise which had bought the car plant and to think about new forms of public control over corporate activity.

When listing these issues, David Harvey is consciously proposing that "*different levels and kinds of abstraction*" approach should be used. That makes him ask about the legitimacy of this reasoning procedure, about the role of intellectuals' knowledge confronted with a struggle in which real people, their life story and a strong union tradition are involved. To emphasize the problematic nature of his approach is probably what Harvey is more interested in : "*What is it that constitutes a privileged claim to knowledge and how can we judge, understand, adjudicate, and perhaps negotiate at very different levels of abstraction under radically different material conditions ?*".

Up to this point, the questions about knowledge and action proposals' legitimacy reproduce those that may have experienced intellectuals involved in consultancy practices to popular movements. The welcome change of Harvey's text, let us say so, is that these kind of practices are taking place much less frequently than twenty years ago and it becomes hard to find written reflections about these practices' dilemmas. And because he restores a certain intellectual tradition, David Harvey looks at his pairs with the same distant strangeness that he experiences during an evening of participant observation in an Evangelical Pentecostal Preachers meeting. In a certain occasion, a conference on globalization and a preachers meeting shared the same hotel accommodations. Harvey says he could not avoid contrasting the "*competitive tension*" and the "*incredulity and resentful passivity*" at the globalization conference with the "*enthusiasm, joy and vigor*" of the Pentecostal meeting. And he wonders what is the meaning of the absence of "*foundational beliefs*" among his pairs and imagines humoursly how his concern would be greeted at the globalization conference : "*The deconstructionists would go to work with icy precision, the relativists would callously sneer, the critical theorists would rub their hands and say " this simply will not do" and postmodernists would exclaim " what a dinosaur !"*".(2)

To Harvey, nevertheless, the anecdote don't put out the question of " *foundational beliefs* " and its rejection by so-called hypercritical trends of thought. On one hand, to tell this episode, as many others throughout the book, is part of a kind of discursive strategy which uses narrative as the starting point of concrete situations' analyses and which also allows the comparison of different approaches for their treatment. On the other hand, because Harvey says that the " *task of critical analysis is not, surely, to prove the impossibility of foundational beliefs (or truths), but to find a more plausible and adequate basis for the foundational beliefs that make interpretation and political action meaningful, creative and possible* " (p.2)

Through systematic comparison and contrast of approaches, Harvey draws the limits of a theoretical territory which criticizes as much positivist and empiricist analysis as extreme relativist trends of thought (which he identifies as contemporary manifestations of a "new idealism"), without abandoning the findings of both. At first, when referring to the dialectical and relational approach that he wants to build, Harvey talks about " *bodies of knowledge accumulated by different structures of enquiry and to show how such transformations and translations are revealing of new and often interesting insights*". Later on, he intensifies even more his purpose a using of Marx's phrase : " *to rub together conceptual blocks in such a way that they catch fire* " (p.197).

The contrast and friction procedures lead quite often to really interesting results. However, the general structure of the book - its lenght and intricacy, as Harvey himself remarks, and its frequent side-paths and flash-backs - seems to reflect the difficulties, or the limits, to a systematic usage of a procedure which leaves a " *residue of problems and issues for which translation is hard if not impossible*" (p.7).

Yet, to Harvey, there are limits which have to be necessarily surmounted, and, among them, an inextricable and compulsive association between a certain ontological priority given to process, flux and flow in understanding the world, and on the other hand tendencies to treat unreconcilable difference, incomunicability, particularity and irreducible individualism as absolutes. Or still, to consider that thought and discourse are all that matters.

To the "dissolution of all fixity and permanence", Harvey opposes the "solid rock" of historical-geographical materialism, i.e. his project to "rebuild Marxian meta-theory in such a way as to incorporate an understanding of spato-temporality (and socio-ecological issues) within its frame" (p.9) Harvey's aim to construct a "general theory of dialectical and historical geographical materialism" does not only derive from his controverse with hypercritical and ultra-relativist theoricist in a narrow sense. Reacting to the pervasive skepticism which he detects in the conference on globalization, Harvey recalls the need to interweave concerns about social justice with the understanding of foundational geographical concepts and concrete politics of space, time,place and environment (nature).

Here we may turn back to the conflict at the Rover car plant in Oxford, and see how he resorts to Raymond Williams' critical theorizing and novels to discuss the nature and the difficulties of a different kinds and levels of abstraction's approach of a local struggle. Harvey evokes R. William's writings about place, militant particularism and the attention that new socialist theories should give to place in a period of explosion of the international economy and of destructive effects of deindustrialization upon old communities (p.29).

In Raymond Williams' novels, the processes of place creation and dissolution have a more active role in the narrative than actual places. Space relations, in their turn, cannot be dissociated from the process of place constitution and transformation. It is at the intersection of place and space that the characters move and live situations that sometimes let them perceive alternatives for their lives and for a whole community. The idea of alternative is linked to that of a certain kind of possibility. Characters directly or indirectly involved in political practices may avoid the traps of militant particularism. At this point, Harvey "rubs" the debates about the car plant struggle and R. Williams' appreciations about the nature of political engagement itself. To Raymond Williams " *many if not all forms of political engagement have their grounding in some kind of militant particularism*", they have to face the following difficulty :

"... because it had begun as local and affirmative, assuming an unproblematic extension from its own local and community experience to a much more general movement, it was always insufficiently aware of the quite systematic obstacles which stood in the way" (p.32).

In the novels, contradictions may provisionally be solved: impulses originating from outside may be internalized, may be transformed into a local "*structure of feeling*". Different levels and kinds of abstractions may interfere, a new understanding of the world may be achieved. On the episode at the car plant, against Harvey's point of view, one idea prevailed : it was only worth to fight to get back mass employment, and the future of socialism in Oxford depended on the outcome of this struggle. What Harvey means by being loyal to a certain conception of socialism becomes clearer when, after R. Williams, he recalls that "*capitalism has fortuitously taken a path these last 20 years towards the elimination of many of the militant particularisms that have traditionally grounded socialist politics - the mines have closed, the assembly lines cut back or shut down, the ship-yards turned silent*" and that today, no matter how "*difficult and problematic it may be*", only "*new combinations of both old and new forms of militant particularism*", of "*different forms of alliances*" will be able to ground socialist politics (p.41). In other words : our anti-capitalist (or anti-oppression) movements were anti-fordist, now that capitalism got rid of Fordism, are we going to defend Fordism ?

Once again from R. Williams' writings, D. Harvey borrows a sort of procedure suggestion - "*Everything will have to be done by negotiation, by equitable negotiation and it will have to be taken steadily along the way*" (p.41) - that leads him to take into account a very large range of point of views and to put them into perspective, as if he was looking for the necessary negotiation that may also figure out the form and the movement of new alliances and of new political identities.

Negotiate... And to be sure, Harvey will negotiate with a gigantic range of theoretical options. Harvey's work is impressive by his encyclopedic survey of so many scholars, of ecologist, post-modernist, critical social theorists. Not a mapping, an Atlas ! Yet, at the end, we stick to the impression that the classical "foundational beliefs" remain to him unchanged : marxist. Well, that is at least loyalty ! Like the pentacostal preacher he invokes at the opening, Harvey remains a believer. And it is good. Look at his use of "critical", deconstructivist literature : he emphasizes, correctly, that any material reality (nature, gender, space...) is view (and spoken of) through the spectacles of social relations, but finally these social relations are stable like a rock : capitalism.

Actually, we believe that a post-marxist theory could have been explored without becoming a betrayer of the oppressed, of the exploited. The lesson of dialectal materialism which Harvey reassesses in chapter 4 is a bit too much Engelsian. New views about materialism and dialectics have developed in the second half of this century. What they have in common is :

- * the acceptance of the infinite diversity of contradictions that weave our world, and their mutual autonomy,
- * the successions of periods of crisis and period of stabilization ("regime") within and between these contradictions, across time and space,
- * the role of language, representations, institutions, in the shaping and regulation of compromises through struggles and negotiations.

French regulation approach, latin-american sociology, have promoted some of these views. Yet, Harvey's attempts to define a new "historical-geographical materialism", providing a new "geography of difference", do not appear as a major step forward from 1960's-1970 marxist literature on unequal development and the making of space.

Out of this kaleidoscope of relations, revolts, "militant particularisms", compromises, is there some room for "foundational believes" ? Probably not in a mere improvement of old socialism. But, step by step, old values are worked through social movements into new believes. The names of them may vary, let us propose : "autonomy", "solidarity", "accountability to the next generations on this planet". Habermas has a lot to say about this process of the making of common truth through communication. And probably Harvey will turn more Habermasian in his next contributions : "dialogue" and "loyalty" are the basis for such a dialectics.

But other ways are also open. Do we discover the "other", the other class, the other nation, the other gender, the other species, only from books or tales, or also (like Levinas, Jonas, Dostoïewsky did) through the mere surprise of their face ? Through the respect stemming from their existence, here and now ? That is a safer ground for new believers. For Reason is powerless without Sympathy.

Both of us [Ana Maria and Alain] had move from the Red to some greener views. In the course of our evolution, loyalty to our past commitments as been both a safe-guard and a limit, a constant question anyhow. As Charles Péguy said, "Revolution is an appeal from a superficial loyalty to a deeper loyalty". Placing the question of loyalty as the corner stone of his book, David Harvey have anyway made a great work.