

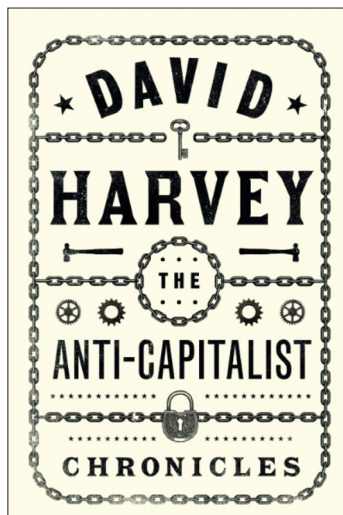
The anti-capitalist chronicles

As crônicas anticapitalistas

Las crónicas anticapitalistas

JULICE SALVAGNI ¹
VICTÓRIA MENDONÇA DA SILVA ¹

¹ UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL (UFRGS) / ESCOLA DE ADMINISTRAÇÃO, PORTO ALEGRE – RS, BRAZIL



Harvey, D. (2020). *The anti-capitalist chronicles*. London, UK: Pluto Press. ISBN: 0745342094.

Keywords: Anti-capitalism. Neoliberalism. Capitalist Crisis.

Palavras-chave: Anticapitalismo. Neoliberalismo. Crise Capitalista.

Palabras clave: Anticapitalismo. Neoliberalismo. Crisis capitalista.

The book is part of the Red Letter series, which is inspired by Antonio Gramsci, seeking to consolidate the debate of anti-imperialism and social inequalities at the “heart of the political and intellectual agenda” (Harvey, 2020, p. 7), align to the democratic resistance struggle faced by progressive forces. Therefore, the writing took place through public discussions with social movements, aiming to help activists to design “political meanings” of cultural constructions by analyzing the current neoliberal conjuncture through the lens of Marxism.

According to Harvey, in spite of neoliberalism having circulated for decades around the world, it has also encountered resistance. In Gramsci’s expression, there is a neoliberal “crisis of authority” driven by the rising disbelief from the popular masses. This means that “[...] the neoliberal project is very much alive, but, significantly, with its legitimacy lost” (Harvey, 2020, p. 7), congregating with neofascism to survive. In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro uses “[...] violence and racist, sexist, and reactionary common-sense appeals” (Harvey, 2020, p. 8) to place the country in a neoliberal scenario, which is compared by the author to the Pinochet regime in Chile. Bolsonaro rising would be, according to him, a “[...] political expression of the crisis of capitalism and the neoliberal state” (Harvey, 2020, p. 8). In this context, the “[...] Ideologues of the far right are advocating that the poor, the ill, and the elderly sacrifice their lives by going to work for the so-called good of ‘the nation.’” (Harvey, 2020, p. 8). This call, however, has generated global instability.

For instance, the author refers to the protests in Chile in 2019, marked by police repression against demonstrators. Under pressure, Sebastián Piñera was forced to increase pensions, social security, and the minimum wage, in addition to suspending the state of emergency and retreating the military forces from the streets. Apart from Chile, Ecuador has also experienced similar protests. By determination of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), new taxes were implemented in the country and fuel subsidies were deployed. However, Lenin Moreno was only able to return to Quito after cancelling this program and negotiating with the protesters. In Bolivia, although in a different circumstance, Evo Morales was accused by the extreme right of rigging the elections in his favor, provoking protests among groups of contrasting positions.

Book review submitted on May 04, 2021 and accepted for publication on November 02, 2021.

[Translated version] Note: All quotes in English translated by this article’s translator.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1679-395120210095x>

Lebanon, Baghdad, Iraq, and France have also been staging protests, indicating that the world is in a state of upheaval. The discontents are basically centered on the political process that benefits the wealthier economically and deprives the people of basic necessities. Such mobilizations, as those of 2013 in Brazil and Turkey, are events that disappear for a while and then suddenly return around the world, although the logistics of these movements may be changing. In Lebanon, after many years of fighting, religious factions unite against the kleptocratic, autocratic, oligarchic form of government. Harvey considers that something similar happened in Brazil in 2019, when leftist parties jointly debated the political situation, bringing some hope of unity.

The central contradictions of capital that cause dissatisfaction are, according to the author, social inequalities, environmental problems, and compound growth. The exponential growth that has occurred since the 1970s creates problems of production, distribution, and consumption. Capital is having problems finding sustainable opportunities to allocate so much money. Even so, the prospect of using resources to address environmental degradation and social inequality without the interventions of a world government is practically nonexistent. Marx realized that there would come a time when (infinite) money could no longer be reinvested in a sustainable basis. However, the dilemma, in other words: dialectic, is that although capital is so large that it succumbs, there is no possibility of survival without it. Harvey then predicts that socialism and anti-capitalism will have to radically negotiate with the hugeness of capital, without these protests turning into small wars.

In a review of recent history, Harvey considers that in the 1970s, with supply-side economics or monetarism, ways of controlling productive processes were made possible. By weakening labor unions, monetizing elections, and dominating the media, large corporations consolidated their hold on power and destroyed the welfare state. In the 1990s, there was a great advance in social inequalities in most countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). However, with the triumph of labor deregulation and weakened environmental and financial regulations, a new era of neoliberal thinking gained visibility. The “self-made businessmen” began to perceive themselves as individually responsible for social problems, ignoring the system. This discourse prevailed during the 2007-2008 crisis, when the government bailed out the bankers and left the people with nothing, which was a contradiction in terms.

When dealing with the contradictions of neoliberalism, the author reaffirms that the increasing exploitation of workers, in addition to increasing the capital of capitalists, also produces a higher rate of unemployment and precariousness. However, if capitalists underpay workers, who will consume? It is in this impasse that geographic expansion, the offer of credit and the State subsidy to corporations are intensified. Harvey suggests that the subjectivity in which financial services find themselves leads to constantly unregulated growth. Thus, capital grows in a compounded way: countries that were inactive are now fully integrated into the global capitalist economy. There is an insanity in monetary growth, which does not follow a “physical” progression, and it is precisely in these monetary indicators that the great social inequalities reside. In the speculative economy, there is a distinct investor class “[...] whose only interest is getting a high rate of return by whatever means possible without any political, social, or economic restraints” (Harvey, 2020, p. 24).

As a side note, Harvey analyzes the 2018 presidential election in Brazil, when Jair Bolsonaro’s victory forecast sounded favorable to the foreign market, raising the stock market index. The presidential campaign was guided by an anti-corruption discourse, aiming to win voters and not, in fact, fight it. Despite the government sustaining prejudiced positions and pro-dictatorship speeches, what led the international market to invest in Brazil after Bolsonaro’s election was something similar to the first neoliberal wave: an agenda of privatizations, fiscal austerity, and budget balancing of social programs. In other words, the far right “[...]is unified in its support for neoliberal projects and for the increasing concentration and centralization of wealth in society, even as it supports ratcheting up the repression of opposition movements” (Harvey, 2020, p. 28).

On the other hand, while it is tempting to say that the working class has disappeared, the truth is that it is simply not performing the same activities and is no longer hired for the same services. In the contemporary working class, “[...] mutual interests of race, gender, and class are fused at one level while the identities remain distinct throughout” (Harvey, 2020, p. 58). For these workers to work collectively, it is necessary that they perceive their common interests and that they have a uniformity. Yet dissatisfaction has led to a scenario in which everyone is to blame but capital, and to violent responses, bringing out support for political figures who stir up hatred. In Brazil, Bolsonaro is the representation of a populist extreme right that restores the power of capital using authoritarian ideas and neo-fascist policies.

Thinking about building a model that overcomes such a dramatic scenario, Harvey invites us not to give up individual freedom as part of socialism, since, to achieve freedom, it is necessary to achieve a society in which everyone has opportunities. Meanwhile, the right monopolizes the concept of individual freedom, albeit on a model that is not at all libertarian. Marx already said that freedom is nothing if there is nothing to eat or no access to health, education, etc. For Polanyi (1980), the possibility of going beyond a market economy would open the way to a universal freedom. However, for Harvey, Polanyi's "liberal utopianism" would be an obstacle to achieving true freedom since the regulation of the market by the state would condemn the freedom of the individual.

The author emphasizes that the Chinese economic transformation lacks a long look at the promise of how (perhaps) socialism is being conducted. In the Chinese environment, the rapid development of countries like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan moved the ruling party to seek to meet the needs of the people, inspired by a philosophical version of Marxist ideology. Although with reservations, this move was successful in the sense of being close to zeroing the extreme poverty rates, as well as achieving fast urbanization and excellent indices of job creation. However, the unfair working conditions must be seriously problematized, as well as the uncompensated level of production, highly harmful to the environment.

Regarding the manufacturing system around the world, Harvey signals the intensification of labor precarization, subdivisions and monopoly. In the context of Brazilian administration, Faria (2011), in line with this aspect, refers to the implications of a capitalist management ideology to emphasize the degradation of work. Thus, capital takes away the autonomy of the subjects in everyday life, who find themselves coerced by the constant search to meet basic needs, besides being stimulated to consumerism. Since free time is one of the greatest indicators of a fair society, freedom would only come when the dominance of need is overcome. However, there is, on the part of capital, the impetus to control work processes and appropriate goods, even violently. By appropriating small companies through mergers and acquisitions, the large corporations operate in a system of accumulation completely disconnected from production. There is also land appropriation, when an area with potential is monopolized, expelling, or oppressively removing the power of local producers. In this regard, Harvey cites Gunnar Myrdal regarding the process of "cumulative circular causation," in which regions are acquired through their bankruptcy.

Harvey argues that Marx did not get too caught up in the geographical issue of power in capitalism, making it an inconclusive debate. However, it should be noted that the theory of capital accumulation advocates that the enigma of the problem is unveiled when "the money is followed". Thus, resorting to the systemic accumulation cycles outlined by Arrighi (1994), at a certain point, capital may experience expansion difficulties and end up assuming a more fluid form, such as financialization. Whether in territorial or capitalist logic, which derives from the circulation and infinite accumulation of capital, the power conflict leads to the big question of who carries the legitimacy within the State. In the dynamics of corporations, the State Power "[...] becomes subservient to private capital. So, if it is not the bond-holders it is the large monopoly corporations who are in control." (Harvey, 2020, p. 40). Regarding such hegemony in Brazilian industrial society, Tragtenberg, in 1989, already announced corporations as "companies with a soul".

In *Grundrisse*, Marx (2011) describes an alienation in which the value and the commodity, both created by the worker, belong to capital. Also, the capitalist is an alienated being since he has no control of the market and the coercive laws of competition force him to take action. This double alienation, therefore, would be fundamental in the capitalist mode of production. One of the forces that could limit this double alienation is state legislation, by not allowing abuses at work. However, protective labor measures are not always demanded, as compulsory consumerism has been created to fill the dissatisfaction with work: consumer niches divide people into lifestyles, the useful life of products is reduced, the market becomes more dynamic. Optimistically, however, Harvey concludes that there is a popular backlash brewing, as people who are unemployed or under-assisted are likely to form a new working class. For him, this point is important, because "[...] the real root to individual liberty and freedom and emancipation is a situation where all of our needs are taken care of through collective action" (Harvey, 2020, p. 81).

Finally, to understand the neoliberal conjuncture, it is necessary to map the contradictions of the modes of production by analyzing the socioeconomic and political context. Such elements are constitutive of the rationality that subsidizes Brazilian organizational management in its multiple facets of injustice, violence, and inequality.

REFERENCES

- Arrighi, G. (1994). *O longo século XX: dinheiro, poder e as origens do nosso tempo*. Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Contraponto.
- Faria, J. H. (2011). *Economia política do poder*. Curitiba, PR: Juruá.
- Harvey, D. (2020). *The anti-capitalist chronicles*. London, UK: Pluto Press.
- Marx, K. (2011). *Grundrisse, manuscritos econômicos de 1857-1858: esboços da crítica da economia política*. São Paulo, SP: Boitempo.
- Polanyi, K. (1980). *A grande Transformação: as origens de nossa época*. Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Campus.
- Tragtenberg, M. (1989). *Administração, Poder e Ideologia*. São Paulo, SP: Cortez.

Julice Salvagni

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6334-0649>

Ph.D. in Sociology from Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS); Assistant Professor at School of Business Administration, Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). E-mail: julicesalvagni@gmail.com

Victória Mendonça da Silva

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6728-3744>

Undergraduate Bachelor's Degree in Public and Social Administration from Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS); CNPq scholarship students of Scientific Initiation- School of Business Administration at Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). E-mail: vickymendoncass@gmail.com