

ALEJANDRO DE COSS-CORZO<sup>1</sup>

## Endless dispossession: looking at Mexico through David Harvey's gaze<sup>2</sup>

Mexico seems to be immersed in an unending series of catastrophes. Every day new stories of injustices and horrible deaths smother us. Social networks, both physical and virtual, are continuously filled with outrage, which more often than not, suddenly decays. These processes, some clearly connected and others apparently distant, can be explained in a systematic fashion through the work of David Harvey.

In his work, Harvey has sought to explain how capital accumulation produces and transforms space. This focus has established his body of work as one of the main contributions to Marxist theory in the last fifty years. In particular, he has focused on explaining the production of urban space; the role of violence and dispossession in the accumulation of capital, and the role finance plays in the capitalist system and its crises. Even if these three topics were scarcely explored by Marx, Harvey looks for clues and follows his steps in a critical and complementary way.

In this brief essay, I will look to explain the catastrophic storm that has become normal in Mexico, guided by Harvey's work. In particular, I will use his concept of *accumulation by dispossession* to understand how drug manufacturing, some law and policy reforms (in the energy sector, in particular), changes in land tenure, and trade liberalisation, can produce dispossession processes that are necessary for capital accumulation. To look at Mexico through Harvey's eyes also gives us the opportunity to understand how actual and potential resistances to dispossession, catastrophe and death are configured. This takes into account the role not only of global capitalist

---

<sup>1</sup> ALEJANDRO DE COSS-CORZO is a PhD candidate at the Department of Sociology in the London School of Economics (LSE).

<sup>2</sup> This article was originally published in <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2017/3/1/endless-dispossession-looking-at-mexico-through-david-harveys-gaze> on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017.

forces; it also considers the function the national state, local capitalists and internal colonialism has in creating and maintaining processes of accumulation by dispossession (Gudynas, 2015; Martínez, et al., 2015).

\*\*\*

The modern history of the land that has been made into Mexico starts with a process of dispossession. National folklore has produced a clear portrait. Behind the caricature that represents indigenous populations as pristine, and the Spaniard as evil itself, there are well documented process of pillage that connect this territory to a global system based on capital accumulation and circulation (Wallerstein, 1988). The making of New Spain is an essential part of colonialism, a process that, even if transformed, persists today.

This dispossession occurs over the centuries. Moreover, it refers not only to the resources taken to Europe or the gold that fills the coffers of global powers; it is also an internal process. It is that constituted by the forced displacement of peasants and indigenous towns; the loss of common rights; the subservience of several property regimes to one: private property; the subordination of alternative production and consumption practices; the progressive monetisation of life; slavery and its trade industry; debt, and, finally, the financial credit system (Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, 2005).

This dispossession, thought by Marx as “primitive accumulation” (Marx, 1976), still continues. It does not belong to a singular, previous, closed off moment (Bonefeld, 2001). Due to this characteristic, Harvey calls it “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2003), and frames it as a key mechanism for capital reproduction. Moreover, the different ways in which this process takes place are not linear. That is, they do not follow any logic of inexorable progress; dispossession through debt coexists, for example, with the loss of rights over the commons.

Thus, the process of dispossession is central for capital’s continuous reproduction. In over accumulation moments, where labour force and capital are abundant but cannot be used in productive ways, dispossession is a mechanism that successfully moves around the imminent crisis. That is, surplus capital and unemployed workforce are

used in producing new spaces of capital accumulation and reproduction, avoiding the destruction of capital and thwarting any potential labour revolt. This movement, a 'spatio-temporal fix' (Harvey, 1982), is twofold. On one side, it implies opening new markets, often by force. On the other, it requires undertaking large-scale infrastructural processes - contemporary urbanisation is an ideal example of this (Harvey, 1985; 1989; 2013)

The spatio-temporal fix modifies the territory. The production of new spaces that are useful for capital accumulation and reproduction is ever changing. Capitalism produces new spaces according to its temporary needs, often to destroy them when they become insufficient (Harvey, 1982). The many high-rises that are increasingly being built in Mexico City are a clear example of how capital destroys now obsolete spaces, transforming the urban fabric and shape and its dynamics.

This process of perennial expansion implies profound changes in property relations as well. The 1992 Agrarian Law is a good example of how this change becomes institutionalised. This reform sought to create a land market in order to promote the transition to capitalist relations of production in rural Mexico. The *ejidatario*<sup>3</sup>, now freed from the land, can become cheap workforce.

Economic liberalisation can also create and accelerate dispossession processes. NAFTA arguably accelerated the transformation of the Mexican agrarian productive structure. Subsistence farming declined strongly; peasants were forced to move and migrate. For example, in the northern Mexican state of Baja California, we have witnessed the struggle of diverse indigenous peoples who migrated from southern Mexico, almost subjected to a state of slavery, displaced forcibly by poverty and the withdrawal of the state. These communities, originally from the southern states of Guerrero and Oaxaca, migrated to the north looking for decent jobs in the agricultural sector. What they found was violent exploitation, working 12-shifts for

---

<sup>3</sup> *Ejid*os are part of a particular common land property regime, in which rights over land and built environment are shared by a group of individuals, called *ejidatarios*. *Ejid*os are managed in a collective way, requiring the agreement of an assembly of members for all important decisions. In 1992, the Agrarian Law changed, so that individual parcels within *ejidos* could become private property. The change is relevant in several dimensions, as *ejidos* were one of the main symbolic and material results of the 1910 Mexican Revolution.

70 dollars a week without any kind of social security. Their strike ended in the creation of a new union, but their demands were not met.

These migratory processes can have many causes. The huge influx of cheap maize from the United States that came with NAFTA is one of them. Another one can be the mechanisms of legal easement that the recently approved Energy Reform in Mexico proposes: the obligation to rent -for periods of 50 years- that owners of those lands that are deemed useful for the production and transportation of hydrocarbons have. These transformations of land use and productivity can accelerate and deepen this forced displacement, increasing workforce availability, and therefore, rendering it cheaper.

Laws and norms can become mechanisms to sanction and promote accumulation by dispossession processes. In Colombia, the norm 9.70 of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States forbids peasants to sow their own seeds. Not only does this norm force them to buy 'authorised seeds'. It also requires them to do so every year, as the traditional practice of selecting the best seeds and reusing them is now forbidden. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which is its ratification process, will mean the same for rural Mexico. Dispossession processes accelerate, entering new spaces, and potentially contributing to the deepening of class contradictions, even to the point of life and death.

Just as dispossession forms are not linear, neither are exploitation dynamics. Even if capitalism guides its logic around the capital-wage labour relation, there are other domination forms with which capitalism cohabits (Quijano, 2000). The organisation of inequality around race and gender lines shows how the capital-labour relation can be insufficient to explain capitalism as a system. That is, the fact that indigenous peoples are being exploited and repressed in Baja California is not arbitrary. There, the inherent racism in the coloniality of power can be seen (Quijano, 2000).

Death and accumulation are also intertwined in territories that have been sown with bodies. The frontiers between organised crime, legal industries and state institutions become blurred. In Guerrero, people that have systematically opposed drug cartels,

mining industries, and its connivance with local authorities have been persecuted, jailed and murdered. This is the visible hand of “necrocapitalism” (Banerjee, 2008).

The concept of accumulation by dispossession allows us to see struggles that depart from the classical Marxian notions of proletarian politics (Harvey, 2005). The different alliances that take place as reaction and opposition to a dispossession-oriented capitalist stage often have autonomist goals. In Mexico, the indigenous community of Cherán in Michoacán, the communitarian police forces in Guerrero, and the Zapatista communities in Chiapas can illustrate the ways in which the expansion of accumulation by dispossession processes can give place to new ways of organising, resisting and producing outside capitalism.

Seeing Mexico through David Harvey’s eyes, we can conclude that the making of a more just, fair and equal society cannot be reduced to any dogma. In the liminal spaces of dispossession, creative ways of living within and outside capitalism can be seen. In Mexico, those opposing dispossession are finding ways to build larger movements together. Through this organisation, several initiatives have been created. For example, the Campaign for the Defence of Mother Earth and the Territory, is attempting to shed light to the struggles of many Mexican organisations and towns, which oppose the commodification of land and natural resources. By questioning and resisting one of the basic dynamics of capitalism, the appropriation of resources (Moore, 2015), these movements point to a different way of being in the world, based not on death and dispossession, but on life and the collective production of a fairer society.

## References

- Banerjee, S. (2008). Necrocapitalism. *Organizational Studies*, 1541-1563.
- Bonefeld, W. (2001). *The Permanence of Primitive Accumulation: Commodity Fetishism and Social Constitution*. The Commoner.
- Gudynas, E. (2015, September 28). La necesidad de romper con un colonialismo "simpático". Retrieved from Plan V: <http://www.planv.com.ec/historias/sociedad/la-necesidad-romper-con-un-colonialismo-simpatico>

- Harvey, D. (1982). *The Limits to Capital*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Harvey, D. (1985). *The Urbanisation of Capital*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Harvey, D. (1989). From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: the Transformation of Urban Governance in Late Capitalism. *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography*, Vol. 71, No. 1, 3-17.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2013). *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. Londres: Verso Books.
- Martínez, E., Morales, V., Simbaña, C., Wilson, J., Fernández, N., Purcell, T., & Rayner, J. (2015, October 13). Ni Colonialistas ni simpáticos: una respuesta a Eduardo Gudynas\*. Retrieved from La línea de fuego: <https://lalineadefuego.info/2015/10/13/ni-colonialistas-ni-simpaticos-una-respuesta-a-eduardo-gudynas/>
- Marx, K. (1976). *Capital: a critique of political economy*. London: Penguin Books.
- Moore, J. W. (2015). *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. New York: Verso Books.
- Quijano, A. (2000). Colonialidad del Poder y Clasificación Social. *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 342-386.
- Wallerstein, I. (1988). *El capitalismo histórico*. Mexico City: Siglo XXI.