

DAVID HARVEY AND THE MADNESS OF COMPLEX REASON

DAVID HARVEY Y LA LOCURA DE LA RAZÓN COMPLEJA

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Resumen

Este artículo analiza algunas ideas de David Harvey, en relación con el fundamento epistemológico de su propuesta. Se estudia además la relación entre la teoría de la complejidad, la noción de modelo y el marxismo, con el fin de comprender las contradicciones que derivan de esto, no solo para el marxismo sino para el estudio del capitalismo. En contraposición, se establece un retorno a la dialéctica y a su noción de *Wissenschaft* como medio para superar las tergiversaciones que la propuesta de Harvey hace del pensamiento de Marx.

Palabras clave: Filosofía, marxismo, dialéctica, teoría de la complejidad, neoliberalismo.

Abstract

This paper analyzes some ideas of David Harvey in relation to the epistemological background of his proposal. It also studies the relationship between complexity theory, the notion of model, and Marxism, in order to comprehend the contradictions derived from this, not only for Marxism, but also for the study of capitalism. On the contrary, it establishes a return to dialectics and its notion of *Wissenschaft* as a means to sublimate the distortions of Marxian thought that Harvey's proposal does.

Keywords: Philosophy, Marxism, Dialectics, Complexity Theory, Neoliberalism.

Introduction

We will here study some elements of Harvey's¹ work in relation to the assumption of complexity theory into Marxism. For this, in methodological

1 David Harvey was born in 1935 and is geographer. He has worked for New York University (USA) and the University of Johns-Hopkins (USA). His work is developed around the study of the urban phenomenon, the

terms, this investigation is based upon a comprehensive literature review that permits assuming several studies on the relation between complexity theory, the notion of model, and Marxism around the analysis of Harvey's proposal. Thus, we are able both to determine the failures and contradictions stemmed from mixing the Marxian meta-language with the principles of complexity theory and, in tandem, to reestablish the dialectical principles vis-à-vis the notion of *Wissenschaft* (dialectical science) as a means to sublimate the errors committed by Harvey in his approach to dialectics.

In this context, Harvey presumes "that now is as good a moment as any to review Marx" (Arabindoo, 2017, p. 251). Of course, one of the most recent books of David Harvey (*Marx, Capital and the Madness of Economic Reason*) develops a theme already present through his erstwhile work; that is, the idea of that the production of space is linked to the analysis of the circulation of capital (Clerval, 2011).

Thus, Harvey (2018) posits a review of Marx's laws of motion of capital. For this, he refers to a part of Marx's work such as: *Capital, Theories of Surplus Value, A Contribution to Political Economy* and *Grundrisse*. However, in this attempt, Harvey gets away from the Marxian method,³ i.e., from dialectics so as to present Marx's work in the light of complexity theory⁴ and in tandem vis-à-vis the notion of model,⁵ which stymies as the comprehension of Marx's thought as the understanding of capitalism.

Harvey's depletion of Marxian thought to a mere model brings in itself, as we shall see, some contradictions that make such reduction inconsistent with the proposal set up by himself in this book and along his previous work.

city, and the application of Marxist categories to the analysis of the urban.

- 2 Of course, this paper is already a manifestation of the scientific imperatives given by the notion of *Wissenschaft*; i.e. the reader will here find a break with the rules developed into positivism and its notion of science – *Wissenschaft* does not imply a methodology. To this respect, see: (Alfaro-Vargas, 2019).
- 3 In this way, Harvey follows the neoliberal imperative of establishing a notion of science that permits "the already well-advanced development of evolutionary epistemology" (Hayek, 1992, p. 9), whose main manifestation is the notion of model that is today inextricable related to the neoliberal project (Alfaro-Vargas, 2017a and 2019).
- 4 The term complexity can be understood as follows: "In systems literature, complexity is a term used to describe something with many parts *such that those parts interact with one another in multiple, often unexpected ways*" (Manuse and Snizek, 2017, p. 215). That is, something complex is something with many parts that interact among them – as a model. See also (Alfaro-Vargas, 2017a, 2017b and 2019).
- 5 A model is a product of the set-theoretic mere-topology, i.e. "a model is a construct that is the product of a series of abstracted abstractions; viz., an ensemble of abstractions that have no linkage to the real concrete" (Alfaro-Vargas, 2019, p. 31). In fact, *this is the madness of complex reason* – a schizophrenic paradigm in which is "better one big Lie than the reality" (lillek, 2020, p. 105), whence it is therefore affirmed some kind of "anti-scientific nihilism" (Slobodian and Plehwe, 2020, p. 14).

Harvey and current capitalism

Harvey starts from a definition of value, where this concept is understood as “a social relation” (2018, p. 51) and whose main characteristic is to “escape direct material investigation” (Harvey, 2018, p. 5). In this sense, value is presented as some sort of *abstraction*, which exists but without material support and whose existence is not possible to situate in a specific place; therefore, value is not understandable as an entity being in a Newtonian place (space), but only should it be comprehensible in a relational space-time (Harvey, 2018). The abstraction of value, as a result, is a quantum-mechanics construct; “For this reason [after Harvey] ‘the category of time is at the heart of (Marx’s) critique of political economy’” (2018, p. 142).

Nonetheless, Harvey (2018) affirms that value has an anti-value, which is something like “the relation between matter and anti-matter” (Harvey, 2018, p. 73) in physics. Anti-value would be in Harveyian terms an opposition between use value and non-use value (which he avoids defining as exchange value). Thus, what in the beginning he has defined as a relationship between use value and non-use value becomes a differentiation between value (seen as a good abstraction) and anti-value (seen as a bad abstraction). For Harvey, anti-value is then a bad abstraction due to the impossibility of generating a self-reproduction of capitalism through it. In this context, anti-value “is a threat to the reproduction of capital” (Harvey, 2018, p. 88), in such a way that “Contemporary capitalism is locked into the bad infinity of endless accumulation and compound growth” (Harvey, 2018, p. 173).

Following Harvey, anti-value would engender entropy, since anti-value, understood in terms of the fetishization of financial capital, that “can only culminate in devaluation and destruction” (Harvey, 2018, p. 174), but in a process of bad infinity, which would be but endless, eternal.⁶ Despite such dysfunctionality, systemness of capitalism would have the capacity of self-organizing through the assumption of both relational space-time and spatialization of value.

In the spatialization of value, “the immaterial but objective aspects captured by relational space-time can be decisive in the configuration of regional

6 In fact, in Harveyian terms, “capitalism is defined *qua* something eternal and infinite, being capitalism the only system (mode of production) in history with no entropy” (Alfaro-Vargas, 2019, p. 18). By the way, Iliček (2019) aims at the same direction when he defines capitalism as a negentropic system so as “to hide the systemic crisis of capitalism and the genocidal policies of neoliberalism” (Alfaro-Vargas, 2019, p. 18).

value regimes” (Harvey, 2018, p. 171). In other words, value is thus conceived as a motion that in a globalized world is characterized by the non-linear production/effectivization of surplus value in a spatial movement, which differentiates between spaces of production and those of effectivization of surplus value. This spatialization would permit the development of the bad infinity of endless accumulation, which at the same time would allow the logic of the madness of economic reason – “in which money appears to have the magical power of making more money without cease” (Harvey, 2018, p. 174)– to be bolstered.

Harvey thus sets up a *model* of the current capitalism; that is, he creates a system where the diverse parts of capital function as a whole. In doing that, he adopts complexity theory as a frame of reference for developing his reading of Marx’s work. In *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, Harvey expresses

in the same way that a biologist might isolate a distinctive ecosystem whose dynamics (and contradictions!) need to be analysed as if it is isolated from the rest of the world, so I seek to isolate capital circulation and accumulation from everything else that is going on.⁷ I treat it as a ‘closed system’ in order to identify its major internal contradictions. I use, in short, *the power of abstraction* to build a model of how the economic engine of capitalism works. I use this *model* to explore why and how periodic crises occur and whether, in the long run, there are certain contradictions that may prove fatal to the perpetuation of capitalism as we now know it (Harvey, 2014, p. 8; emphasis added).

In this way, Harvey’s proposal is an expression of complexity theory but with a Marxian meta-language. Harvey then creates a model that both negates the influence of Marxian dialectics in the analysis of economic reason and emphasizes the abstracted (*lo abstraído* in Spanish), not the abstract, to detriment of the concrete.⁸

7 Within this perspective, abstraction is a force that engenders “wholes”, closed systems, whose validity is given in the context of the idea that there is a new universality that “is not an all-encompassing container, a compromise between disparate forces; it is a universality based on division” (Žižek, 2014); nonetheless, this idea is absolutely wrong. In this respect, see: Alfaro-Vargas (2016a and 2019).

8 In relation to the categories of the abstract and the concrete, see: (Alfaro-Vargas, 2016b and 2019).

Harvey and Complexity Theory

Harvey's proposal includes some problems such as the distortion of Marx's thought, the dismissal of the role of dialectics in Marxian thinking, the creation of an artificial model and, subsequently, a conception of capitalism *qua* a self-organizing system where there is no agent of social transformation. Besides, he makes affirmations that have no support, *e.g.*, he ignores the way workers live around the world, when he asserts

life expectancy of workers has risen not fallen in many parts of the world. The lifestyle of the average workers in at least some parts of the world is not all doom and gloom. In some places it even seems to glow seductively in a world of compensatory consumerism (Harvey, 2018, p. 28).

It is plain that he takes some exceptions as a rule, he assumes some ideological behaviors that reproduce capital as something liberating for workers, but all this is solely true in the idealized world of his model – a man-made and complex construct.

Despite all this, I shall especially examine his epistemological background, *i.e.*, the notion of model and, in consequence, complexity theory. Not only does Harvey posit a non-Marxist approach, but an anti-Marxist one as well, which rather legitimizes capitalism and the bourgeoisie as a ruling class.

So, in relation to his gnoseological background, there are three problems I am going to discuss here. Firstly, an abstracted frame of reference for the economic analysis so long as he destroys the dialectical unity of the abstract and the concrete; secondly, the emphasis on exchange value to detriment of use value, and thirdly the annihilation of any possibility of social transformation by elaborating an idealized model where there is neither object nor subject.

Now, it is necessary for us to comprehend what complexity theory is. In this way, complexity theory can be found with very different names; *viz.*, for instance, self-organization theory, politics of abstraction, autopoiesis, and so forth (Hayek, 1992; Alfaro-Vargas, 2019). Nevertheless, we must understand the fact that complexity theory implies the interaction of several parts that together produce a synergic effect, which generates a non-linearity that would enable us to organize a dynamic ontology in opposition to the rigid ontology

of positivism (Alfaro-Vargas, 2017a).⁹ In a more general sense, complexity theory builds sets that are called models or simulations, whose function is to create artificially mathematical representations of reality (known as wholes), where it would supposedly be possible to recreate the reality of a determinate phenomenon, but, however, a model is only a linguistic construct that operates with an artificial language (the language of set-theoretic mere-topology) that is depending on natural language and, therefore, a model is not real, it is only something abstracted (Alfaro-Vargas, 2016a, 2017a, 2017b, and 2019).

The wholes produced by complexity theory are no more than an attempt of some bourgeois evolutionary epistemologies to avoid totality as a category of analysis insofar as totality implies the unity of form and content, and not only the void form generated by models (Alfaro-Vargas, 2016a and 2019). In contrast to the models built by complexity theory, the dialectical notion of totality unites gnoseology and politics, which implies not only the apprehension of reality as movement, but the sublation of the bourgeoisie as ruling class as well.

Thus, complexity theory is what holds the Harveyian proposal. Within the Marxist paradigm, complexity theory eliminates not only the category of the concrete, but also the relationship between Being and language: “Abstract and concrete are a matter of the places concepts occupy within this discourse” (Callinicos, 2014, p. 132). Put differently, without the unity of the abstract and the concrete, the abstract becomes the abstracted, *i.e.* a discourse disconnected to the materiality of the real world –it is then a simple formal linguistic manifestation with no content (Alfaro-Vargas, 2016b and 2019). Therefore, if there is no referentiality (a linkage between Being and language), there is no (economic) analysis, but only evasion, escapism, ideology.

Insofar as Harvey needs to posit an abstracted discourse, he has forgotten that

the method of ascending from the abstract to the concrete is the only way, for thinking, of appropriating the concrete in order to reproduce it as a mental concrete. In any way, however, the process of origin of the concrete in itself” (*die Methode, vom Abstrakten zum Konkreten aufzusteigen, nur die Art für das Denken ist,*

⁹ As Alfaro-Vargas (2019) has proved, this is completely false, since complexity theory is only a different manifestation of positivism and not a new paradigm.

sich das Konkrete anzueignen, es als ein geistig Konkretes zu reproduzieren. Keineswegs aber der Entstehungsprozeß des Konkreten selbst) (Marx, 1983, p. 35).

By eliminating the category of the concrete, Harvey also destroys the notion of commodity as a dialectical unity of exchange value and use value. What Harvey's proposal really pretends is to distance such a concept from some Marxian conceptions such as surplus value, capitalist exploitation, etc.¹⁰ Without use value, there are no concrete consequences of the extraction of surplus value and in tandem it is possible to construct a model that works in an idealized and idealizing way. In avoiding use value, Harvey may depict dysfunctions and malfunctions of capitalism as a process, in which there is some kind of castrated dialectics between value and anti-value in the context of a self-organizing system, whose autopoiesis would permit, after Harvey (2018), an endless accumulation. Nonetheless, here Harvey also forgot that "All commodity, however, is represented under the double point of view of *use value* and *exchange value*" (*Jede Ware aber stellt sich dar unter dem doppelten Gesichtspunkt von Gebrauchswert und Tauschwert*) (Marx, 1961, p. 15).

Finally, without the category of the concrete and the use value, Harvey has created a man-made model with no referentiality, annihilating not only the object (because of its non-referentiality), but the subject as well. Consequently, there is no subject capable of transforming a non-object and, hence, a model that is something artificial (Oatley, 2011) is only a linguistic-mathematical construct. As Fisher and Leon have correctly expressed, "the model becomes the object of inquiry, rather than the phenomena that was originally of interest" (2017, p. 5). In other words, the power of abstraction, which Harvey mentions in *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, is a merely formal and ideological device, it is only an abstracted discourse:

The emphasis on abstraction responds to the need of both concealing reality and impeding the critical analysis of such reality. Abstraction is, indeed, the realm of the logical principle of identity ($A=A$), where there is no room for social transformation. Inasmuch as abstraction is linked to the principle of identity, abstraction (as an onto-epistemological paradigm) becomes the

10 There is a tendency in the Anglo-Saxon world in relation to the Marxian theory of value, where this theory is rejected as something unreal, e.g., the far-right approach of Konings (2018) and the far-right Marxism (Alfaro-Vargas, 2019).

negation of dialectics, since dialectics sublates such a logical principle through the implementation of the principle of congruence (A||A), which admits of the notions of form and content, and not only the formalization carried out by the principle of identity (Alfaro-Vargas, 2019, p. 27).

Clearly, it is therefore the practical dimension of Marxism that Harvey's approach has forgotten: "The social life is essentially practical" (*Das gesellschaftliche Leben ist wesentlich praktisch*) (Marx, 1978, p. 535).

Marxism beyond Complexity Theory

As we have seen, the *emergentist Marxism* of Harvey develops a distorted version of Marxism and its dialectics. For this reason, it is imperative that we be able to restore dialectics understood as a scientific (*wissenschaftlich*) paradigm, not as a simple and "metaphysical" philosophical principle.

What we need to do is to recapture the category of the concrete as a space of praxis, where both subject and object function as a dialectical unity. In this context, it is possible to reestablish at the same time the unity of Being and language, breaking completely with the (post)postmodern trends that reduce everything to language, to discourse.

To reestablish the unity of Being and language as well as that of the different dialectical categories allows reinserting our rational praxis into totality, and correspondingly permits assuming the transforming role of the historical subject, now not depending upon the abstracted representation of models.

In the same way, the reinsertion of the concrete as a fundamental category is a *sine qua non* for comprehending the current capitalism and its terminal decadence – "capitalism is broken" (Alfaro-Vargas, 2018, p. 17), it is dying. The reinsertion of the concrete also aims at breaking with the absolutization of the principle of identity of formal logic (A=A), which reigns in the epistemological field of complexity theory and of models (Alfaro-Vargas, 2016a, 2017a, and 2019), and which produces a static view of reality where the bourgeoisie would continue surviving. On the contrary, dialectics is founded upon the principle of congruency (A||A) that permits not only apprehending the social, natural movement of Being, but also producing it through conscious, rational praxis.

Linked here to complexity theory, the emergentist Marxism is based on the principles of formal logic; meanwhile, dialectics is the sublation of these principles, which allows understanding that gnoseology and politics are, among other things, dialectically the same, which, however, in complexity theory appears to be separated and so represented in an unreal way.

In this context, the notion of *Wissenschaft* that is inserted into Marxian thought permits restoring not only the scientificity of Marxism, but also the category of totality that has been destroyed and evaded by the application of complexity theory (Alfaro-Vargas, 2019). In fact, as long as *Wissenschaft* is not a methodology, but a systematic and rational knowledge (Sperber, 2013), it is possible to keep the distance required from the imperatives derived from the Hayekian evolutionary epistemology (Hayek, 1992) so as to develop a dialectical thinking that “is by nature critical, in the sense that it negates the absolutization and self-subsistence of any of its determinate contents” (Ferrarin, 2004, p. 13-14). Thus, we are able to generate critical knowledge, which allow us to counteract the pervasive influence of such evolutionary epistemology.

Conclusion

The advantage of recapturing some Marxist notions such as totality, the category of the concrete, the notion of *Wissenschaft*, and so on, lies in the possibility of apprehending some elements that today allow understanding the functioning of the current capitalism in a terminal phase, in order to implement a series of political actions required to generate a more accelerated social change.

The idealization produced by the application of complexity theory and the construction of models is a failed attempt to break with the positivist tradition as long as the existing relationship between complexity theory and formal logic involves an inevitable connection between complex reason and the imperatives of positivism. The idealization of complexity theory avoids comprehending movement –an idealized model is something static.

Put in political terms, the power of abstraction of complexity theory is no more than the legitimation of the status quo of current capitalism. Complexity theory is to be sublated (*aufgehoben*). Thus, the power of abstraction is complex reason disguised as Marxism, but without its critical and material characteristics. Complexity theory is not only non-Marxist, but anti-Marxist

as well. In sum, Harvey's proposal is, therefore, an expression of the madness of complex reason.

Finally, the implementation of the notion of *Wissenschaft* opens the way to (re)evaluate the reach of the analysis stemmed from the application of complexity theory to science. Indeed, this *Wissenschaft* implies not only a detailed scrutiny of the neoliberal science, but also the elaboration of strategies of social transformation linked to the concrete –to the quotidian of the non-bourgeois groups.

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