

David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*. Oxford University Press, 2014. 338 pages. Hardcover \$24.95. ISBN: 978-0-19-936026-0

Reviewed by Alexis Buettgen  
Critical Disability Studies, York University  
alexisbr@yorku.ca

In *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, David Harvey lives up to his recognition as one of the most astute critical analysts of the global capitalist system and its associated injustices. Through this insightful book, Harvey unveils capital for its impacts on capitalism and on our daily lives. To be clear, Harvey distinguishes capital as the economic engine of capitalism. Capitalism, he notes is “any social formation in which processes of capital circulation and accumulation are hegemonic and dominant in providing and shaping...social life” (p. 7). What is refreshing about this book is that Harvey not only helps to unmask what is truly happening in our political economic system, but also creates hypotheses and names opportunities to support strategic learning that informs the development of social change. He epitomizes the need to grasp theory that informs action. From a student perspective, this book has helped me to understand the both the idea of capital and its impacts with greater clarity and provided me with concrete considerations for a better way forward.

In this text, Harvey succeeds in his aim to fill a gap in what he calls a “paucity of new thinking or policies” (p. xi) in the context of a lineup of crises of capitalism – the most recent being the financial collapse of 2008. Harvey establishes why capital appears to be sputtering and grumbling as of late, as well as why this economic engine should be replaced and with what. Harvey lays out how radical changes depend on human volition that must be conscious and fully aware of the nature of the present dangers of capital and the practical choices we face as a society. As he generates insights between past and present political, economic, and social events around the world and what caused them, Harvey effectively lays out Marxist theory in depth and

in a current context. Some of the contradictions are thoroughly explained, but are complex and require active participation of the reader to absorb all that is to be learned throughout *Seventeen Contradictions*. The reader would be amiss to read only one or another part, or one particular contradiction within this book without a sufficient understanding of capital or Marxist theory. This book is a good reference text that can be picked up again and again to refer back to key concepts for further examination and consideration.

The book is divided into three cumulative parts that build a comprehensive story of the contradictions of capital and of potential anti-capitalist responses. Part One lays out the foundational contradictions that are necessary to the functioning of capital, which hang together in such a way that changes to one contradiction instigates changes in another contradiction. Based on empirical and theoretical reasons, Harvey articulates how “an economy based on dispossession lies at the heart of what capital is foundationally all about” (p. 54). Harvey carefully lays out a number of key concepts in Marxist theory – use and exchange value, money, private property, surplus value – to illuminate “the contradictory unity of production and realization” that underpins capitalism. He argues that this contradiction is fundamentally rooted in capital’s inherent need to reproduce itself through ever-growing profit margins, ultimately at the cost of the good wages and job security. But that aggregate demand, in turn, creates the aggregate consumer demand that will allow the realization of that profit through consumption. In this part, Harvey further argues that radical agendas, either revolutionary or reformist, must be formulated with a vision of dissolving capitalist state power over monetary affairs and currency. This vision will save civilization from callous private property and autocratic militarized police state powers that serve the interests of capital rather than the well-being of people.

The foundational contradictions are complex and demand the reader's thoughtful, active participation to reach a more fulsome understanding of capital. To support reader comprehension, Harvey illustrates these complex concepts with concrete contemporary examples that exemplify the contradiction under examination. At the conclusion of Part One, Harvey provides the reader with a helpful summary to make connections between the foundational contradictions and a synopsis of political alternatives such as the need to move away from a focus on exchange values to a focus on use values.

Part Two describes the moving contradictions of capital. Unlike the foundational contradictions that are "constant features of capital in any place and time" (p. 89), the moving contradictions are unstable and constantly changing. Similar to Part One, this draws from a Marxist analysis of capitalism to identify and explore these moving contradictions at work in technological development, divisions of labour, monopoly and competition, social reproduction, and freedom and domination. Harvey notes, "This makes for an understanding of political economy that departs radically from the model of the natural sciences, where it can broadly be assumed that the principles being elucidated are true for all space and time" (p. 89). Harvey highlights the need to capture the sense of movement within these contradictions because the instability and movement provide both political opportunities and pose critical problems. To be effective, alternative political ideas and strategies must be based on the rapidly evolving contradictions of capital's present. Calling on his grounding in geography, Harvey also describes how capital's failings move from place to place through time and space making them a moving target and creating uneven geographical development. This uneven development masks the operation of an "economy based on dispossession" and fundamental contradictions, because

“there is always a successful neighbourhood, region or state where things are going right even in the midst of multiple calamities” (p. 160).

Part Three outlines what Harvey deems the most dangerous contradictions both for capital and for humanity. Like the moving contradictions, these vary geographically from place to place and over time. The dangerous contradictions are endless compound growth, capital’s destructive relationship to nature, and universal alienation. Harvey argues that alienation should be the target for a collective political subjectivity to coalesce around and subsequently constitute an alternative economic engine. The problem, Harvey notes, is to identify, confront and overcome the many forms and frustrations of alienation in order to produce a coherent anti-capitalist opposition. According to Harvey, this is why the close study of the contradictions of capital is so vital to our strategic development of political economic alternatives.

From a disability studies perspective, one will notice that disability is mentioned only once in passing regarding rights movements that have worked their way through the history of capitalism to transform our social world. While there is little explicit recognition of disability in this text, there are many implicit ways in which this book can help further inform and guide the disability movement. For example, he makes the case that “reform movement[s] around reducing social inequality can become the cutting edge for revolutionary transformation” (p. 181). Harvey gives us hope when he suggests that the “gradual decommodification of basic needs provision is a feasible long-term project” (p. 85) – a crucial concept at the heart of the debate about how to best eliminate the poverty and unemployment of people with disabilities. On a related and equally important point, he critiques the work of the left for focusing too much on labour movements in isolation from other contradictions in capital and class practices. With the intensification of neoliberalism, he argues, what labour might win in the domain of production

will be stolen back by landlords, merchants, bankers, etc. Labour may also have to give back almost all of its gains to procure housing, medical care, education, water, and other basic services. Ultimately, the negation of multiple alienations must be at the forefront of any collective political response to the degradation of daily life for the majority. Thus, an anti-capitalist movement must be wary of devoting too much energy and focus to labour struggles.

These arguments are particularly relevant for disability studies and the disability movement. Harvey notes, “An anti-capitalist movement has in the current conjuncture to reorganize its thinking around the idea that social labour is becoming less and less significant to how the economic engine of capitalism functions” (p. 110). This analysis could lead disability studies to consider how people with disabilities, alienated from the prospect of a meaningful life in the realm of labour (as defined by capital at least), might construct a dignified life. Moreover, disability studies and the broader movement often link poverty and social exclusion as inextricably linked issues, thus advocating for the need for inclusion of people with disabilities to reduce their poverty. Yet if, as Harvey convincingly contends, “within capitalism...complete economic egalitarianism is plainly impossible” (p. 177), then how can effective poverty reduction and full equality of people with disabilities be achieved?

Although Harvey does not go into great detail about his ideas for anti-capitalist political praxis, he plants the seed for strategic research and practice going forward. He establishes a sense of hope, clarity, and possibility for real social change through a combination of reform and revolutionary measures which he summarizes in the conclusion and epilogue. As such, Harvey argues for a holistic approach to social change and transformation. As we work to develop a comprehensive theory of disability, let us not lose what David Harvey has offered us and we shall move forward together as a critically informed movement for greater social justice.