STREET LIFE: REBELS, RULERS, AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution

by David Harvey
New York: Verso, 2012
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Dubai: The City as Corporation

by Ahmed Kanna
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011
(ix + 262 pages, notes, bibliography, index) $25.00 (paper)

Reviewed by Deen Sharp

Henri Lefebvre—French philosopher, urban theorist, geographer, a prodigal polymath—hated the "cutting of knowledge into slices," as Rémi Hess, Lefebvre's official biographer and final doctoral student, has noted. A disciplinary nomad and unfashionable Hegelian-Marxist, Lefebvre was largely ignored by the Anglophone world, until the translation into English of *La production de l'espace*, originally published in 1974.

One of Lefebvre's central insights was that social forces and everyday activities produce space and that any analysis of power in capitalist society must take account of it. Twenty years after the publication of *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre continues to hold a prominent place among radical Anglophone scholars. Lefebvre's ideas of space and urbanism form the theoretical foundation for the two books under review here: *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, by David Harvey, and *Dubai: The City as Corporation*, by Ahmed Kanna.

Deen Sharp is a PhD student in the Earth and Environmental Sciences Program, specializing in geography, at the City University of New York.

Geographer and City University of New York distinguished professor David Harvey is primarily responsible for breathing new life into Lefebvre. Harvey was instrumental in realizing the 1991 translation of *La production de l'espace*, which proved to be a major event among critical human geographers and brought a new wave of scholarly engagement with Lefebvre's work. In *Rebel Cities*, Harvey focuses on Lefebvre's careful analysis of urbanization that enabled him to conclude, very early on in the dramatic urbanization that occurred in the 1960s, that an urban revolution was supplanting an industrial one. Lefebvre's idea that poor city dwellers could be at the vanguard of the revolution put him at odds with the Communist Party, which viewed the factory-based proletariat as the central force for revolutionary change. In *Rebel Cities*, Harvey notes that the traditional left continues to struggle with the idea of the revolutionary potential of urban social movements.

In *Rebel Cities*, Harvey brings together three threads: the first, his well-established Marxist analysis of urbanization as central to the circulation of capital; the second, Lefebvre's idea of the right to the city and how a new, more socially just city (or world) can be produced; and finally, an overview of current anticapitalist urban movements, and specifically the Bolivian "rebel city" of El Alto and the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Harvey has long argued that urbanization is central to the development of capitalism because it absorbs surplus production and labor and quells potential revolt through consumerism. The global neoliberal project over the past thirty years has increasingly meant that control over the surplus value (profit) produced by capitalism is in the hands of a smaller and smaller elite. A central "achievement" of the neoliberal project, Harvey argues, has been to merge corporate and state interests to ensure that the disbursement of the surplus in the shaping of the urban processes favors corporations and the upper classes. Crucial for Harvey is the question of how one goes about organizing a city for anticapitalist struggle. *Rebel Cities* outlines a strong revolutionary call to take back the city from the elite. The right to the city is the realization of the establishment of democratic control over the deployment of the surpluses produced through urbanization: the creation of a city for people, not capital.

The rapid urbanization of the world, the global urban protests that erupted in the wake of the predominantly urban-based Arab uprisings, and the rise of city-states, such as Dubai, have given Lefebvre's and Harvey's

insights a renewed urgency. Harvey only briefly discusses the Arab world in *Rebel Cities*, but the region has experienced a building boom for the rich as well as rapid capitalist-driven urbanization. Between 1970 and 2010 the urban population of the Arab states more than quadrupled and is set to double again in the next forty years (UN-HABITAT, *The State of Arab Cities*, 2012). *Rebel Cities* is a highly informative text for understanding the social struggles underway in the Arab world, the forces pushing and shaping the region's urbanization, and how urbanism in the region could be reorganized in more socially just and ecologically harmonious ways.

Strikes by street vendors, taxi drivers, and delivery workers, among many other urban workers, across the Arab world have been a frequent occurrence in recent years. The power of these protests came into focus in the course of the Arab uprisings. Resistance to, and the consequences of, capitalist urbanization in the Arab region certainly formed an important vector of the protests. As Walter Armbrust noted in his *Jadaliyya* article "The Revolution against Neoliberalism," these protests can be understood in part as the organization of urban sites for anticapitalist struggle.

Harvey and Lefebvre's understanding of the revolutionary force of the urban working class is also informative when looking at the current political dynamics of the Arab world. Importantly, Harvey's reading of Lefebvre shows that the urban working class "is a very different kind of class formation [from factory workers]—fragmented and divided, multiple in its aims and needs, more often itinerant, disorganized and fluid rather than solidly implanted" (xiii).

It is notable that despite the dramatic urbanization that has occurred in the Arab world and the importance of urban processes to contemporary life, there is a dearth of scholarly work that focuses on cities and urbanization in the region, particularly beyond Cairo. There are the beginnings of an "urban turn," however, and Ahmed Kanna's *Dubai: The City as Corporation* is an important new contribution to our understandings of the city in the Arab region and more broadly. In a dramatically short time, Dubai has become a symbol of pro-Western modernity, one that both Harvey and Kanna think (the latter far more subtly) is a particularly malign modernity.

Dubai, of course, was not directly part of the Arab uprisings. Indeed, one might question the extent to which Dubai can be understood as an "Arab" city or part of the broader Arab region, given the high number of its

non-Arab inhabitants, and also, as Kanna outlines, the history of its cultural and geographic connections. An Indian Ocean trading hub, Dubai has in the past had much stronger links with both Iran and South Asia than with the Levant and North Africa. In pre-oil Dubai, the population was ethnically heterogeneous, made up of Arab "Bedouins" as well as Persian and South Asian merchants. As Kanna argues, however, present-day formations of citizenship and space are shaped by the complex interweaving of imperialism, local and regional rivalries, oil, and capital. So although Dubai's current population is also heterogeneous, these formations frame Persians and South Asians as threats to Emirati national identity rather than an integral part of it, and Arabs as part of the ethnic fabric.

Contemporary Dubai has distinctive and complex demographics. According to the Dubai Statistics Center, Dubai's population in 2011 was two million, of which only 466,790 were women. Foreigners are estimated to make up ninety-five percent of Dubai's workforce. Dubai's neoliberalization, in which the Maktoum ruling family has sought to place the city at the very center of global flows of capital, has created a privileged, globalized, predominantly Western—but also South Asian—middle-class technocratic elite. It has also created a building boom that brought hundreds of thousands of South Asian migrant workers to the city-state, primarily to work in the construction sector, under notoriously punishing conditions. With such demographics come highly complex citizen and noncitizen, ethnic, class, and gender dynamics.

Following Harvey's line of argument, we might see contemporary Dubai's spectacular urbanization as rooted in the development of Second Empire Paris in 1848. By changing the scale of urban gentrification, Baron Haussmann's rebuilding of Paris, Harvey notes, absorbed huge quantities of labor and capital. It was the first clear crisis of unemployed surplus capital and surplus labor. Harvey sees the experience of Paris under Haussmann being repeated around the globe on an ever-increasing—even farcical—scale. The narrative of Haussmann's Paris is certainly informative when understanding the transformation of Dubai: the wholesale urban development, the demand for prodigal urban projects, the creation of new financial institutions and debt instruments, the construction of a new kind of urban persona, and, finally, the financial crash. Indeed, Harvey does deliver one sharp jab to the elites and urbanization of the Gulf emirates in *Rebel Cities*: "Astonishing,

spectacular, and in some respects criminally absurd urbanization projects have emerged in the Middle East in places like Dubai and Abu Dhabi as a way of mopping up capital surpluses arising from oil wealth in the most conspicuous, socially unjust and environmentally wasteful ways possible (such as an indoor ski slope in a hot desert environment)" (12).

Unlike Haussmann's Paris, the Dubai of the Maktoums has seen the large import of foreign labor. And whereas the financial crisis following Haussmann's urban renewal scheme resulted in the Paris Commune, one of the most celebrated revolutionary moments in history, the implications of the 2008 global financial crisis for Dubai have been, if not revolutionary, then certainly sobering. *Dubai: The City as Corporation* is not, however, an analysis of the global financial crisis and its impact on Dubai or a straightforward Harveyan reading of Dubai.

Kanna is purposefully moving away from the superficial and polemical analysis that has characterized the literature on Dubai, such as Mike Davis's chapter, "Sand, Fear, and Money in Dubai," in his book *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism* and the proliferation of Friedmanesque triumphalism, including Jim Krane's *City of Gold: Dubai and the Dream of Capitalism*. Kanna has added an important addition to the small literature that takes Dubai and its inhabitants seriously and also provides a thorough critique of, and engagement with, the existing work in both English and Arabic, specifically the writings of Abdul Khaleq Abdulla and Christopher Davidson.

Kanna skillfully combines a rich ethnography with a sophisticated theoretical framework, drawing significantly upon Lefevbre and Harvey, among others, to look at how modern Dubai is "imaginatively, visually, and physically made" and remade (173). Unlike Harvey, Kanna stresses that the urbanization of Dubai has been carried out not only through the forces of capital but also the particularities of Dubai's political and cultural processes. Kanna is clearly cognizant of the critique of Harvey's lack of engagement with localism, particularism, race, and gender. He has produced a compelling study that fills this gap while also producing its own theoretical dimension.

The ascendancy of Maktoum-led neoliberalism, Kanna argues, was due to the successful alignment of free-market values with local cultural attitudes and dispositions. Kanna outlines two pivotal moments in the Gulf's history. The first, in the nineteenth century, was the invention of the Maktoum dynasty. Under British domination, the Gulf emirates saw

the establishment of "unitary, hereditary, and absolutist sovereigns" to ensure territorial pacification and the protection of the merchants, who were primarily Persians and Indians (24). The second crucial moment, in the second half of the twentieth century, is a marked shift in the Gulf emirates toward what Kanna describes as a more European-style ethnic nationalism. This shift occurred as oil revenue enabled the ruling families freedom from any collective demands on their rule and enabled them to co-opt the merchants. "With increasing family-state control," he writes, "came the eclipse of a substantive sense of nationalist reform, based on the idea of self-determination by a much narrower, dependent notion of citizenship, the ruling bargain" (55).

The ruling bargain was a deal between the rulers of Dubai and Emirati nationals that resulted in the distribution of resources through the state in exchange for political demobilization. Subsequently, citizens were demobilized politically and, crucially for Kanna's argument, time and space were also depoliticized. In the establishment of the ruling bargain, the family rulers incorporated a complex mix of Emirati nationals and foreigners as their political dependents, yet framed themselves as governing "an indivisible territory and a homogenous citizenry" (117).

Kanna argues that the ruling bargain is spatialized in the Emirati family house, which is hierarchically structured and gender-segregated, with a strict inside and outside. This nostalgic Emirati house, despairing of the vanished village and apprehensive as to the city-corporation they inhabit, functions as a stand-in for politics. It offers a neoorthodoxy to replace the collective claims that politics might make upon the state. Kanna argues, "Society and social process become analogous to (patriarchal) family order, politics becomes a relation of *ri'aya* [caring] and deference to authority, and history becomes (the ruling family's) hagiography" (131).

Neoorthodoxy, for Kanna, takes various forms: it is at once a persuasion, a certain type of discourse, and the production and representation of a certain type of space. As such, it results in a set of spatializations of Dubai that both resonate with the politics of the ruling bargain and have profound implications for identity politics. Specifically, it produces an ethnonational, or ethnocratic, spatialization of local and foreign: "The spatialization of inside and outside, what belongs to "us" and what does not, is analogized as a family affair" (110). The plural Indian Ocean city framed through neoorthodoxy is ethnolinguistically pure and autochthonous.

Kanna is keen to stress, however, that the ruling family does not impose their rule and spatial projects without resistance from those they rule over. Kanna emphasizes that worker strikes are frequent. And within Emirati society, the Maktoum family-state has to constantly negotiate a "volatile terrain" (133). The volatility, Kanna argues, comes from the contradiction between neoorthodoxy, with its pure ethnonationalist space, on the one hand, and, on the other, the project of making Dubai a global city-corporate space, populated by what Kanna, borrowing from Aihwa Ong, calls "flexible citizens."

Kanna's "flexible citizens" are the younger professional "neoliberal" Emiratis who see neoorthodoxy as nostalgic. They do not directly oppose those of the neoorthodox persuasion, who are nominally the parents of the flexible citizens, but instead select "local meanings and values" and tailor them to neoliberal Dubai's ways (139). Flexible citizens are those Emiratis who work in the ruling family's companies and are shaped, Kanna argues, by the state project of class formation: "Essential to the state's hegemonic project is the management of individual subjectivity by inculcating an ability in flexible citizens to speak and enact creative, entrepreneurial, and even rebellious identities in ways unthreatening to the state's essentially neoliberal commitments" (160). Flexible citizens desire to live in the latest residential complex by Rem Koolhass in New Dubai rather than in a vernacular-infused architecture in Dubai Creek.

Importantly, Kanna observes that among those Emiratis he defines as "flexible citizens," the conflict between neoorthodoxy and neoliberalism is most apparent with women. In Kanna's interviews with the male flexible citizens, he notes that "politics somehow disappear." But, he continues, "In the discourses of female flexible citizens . . . politics reenter through the door of gender" (162). The female flexible citizens Kanna interviewed emphasized the need to balance the desire for the new with tradition and were more concerned with the complex connections between "gender, generation, aspiration, identity, and the city-corporation" (162). Both the women and the men, however, were keen to stress their loyalty to the ruling bargain: "The Maktoum-centered image of futuristic, global Dubai of the turn of the twenty-first century was (and seems to remain) a powerful summarizing symbol of aspiration and modernity" (157).

The ruling bargain relies on this futuristic and global Dubai, and its highly segmented urban morphology. This bargain, Kanna argues, should be read as both an ideology and a spatial representation in the Lefebvrian sense. Spatial representation is the privileged domain of scientists, planners and urbanists, technocratic subdividers, and social engineers. Examining spatial representation in Dubai, Kanna illustrates how "starchitects" such as Zaha Hadid and Rem Koolhaas, but also urbanists more broadly, practice a representational politics that support the Maktoum family-state and their antireformism, authoritarianism, and ethnocracy.

Given the resources needed to build, the architect has always needed to develop a relationship with the rich and the powerful—a dynamic that those who work in architecture, which they generally regard as a socially progressive undertaking, have always had difficulty reconciling themselves with. Apologists for starchitects, such as prominent architectural commentator Deyan Sudjic (in his book *The Edifice Complex*, 2011), have argued that "architecture has an existence independent of those who pay for it. . . . Is there, in fact, such a thing as a totalitarian, or a democratic, or a nationalistic building?" (6). Indeed, urbanists have been keen to promote the idea that their work is about an architecture created independently of those who are paying for it. Kanna convincingly argues this is far from the case: "A narrow focus on architecture as the exclusive concern with experimentation in aesthetic form becomes a means of collaborating in the erasure of local histories and the reaffirmation of the claims local elites make on politics, histories, and spaces they already dominate" (80).

The Maktoum dynasty's ability to navigate the terrain of Emirati society and the conflicting demands of both neoorthodox and flexible citizens is crucial to its survival. The dynasty's bringing together of neoorthodoxy and neoliberalism is strikingly expressed in how it conceives of its head of state: ruler Muhammad Al Maktoum is the "CEO of Dubai." In this figuring, the neoorthodox paternalistic leader is merged with the neoliberal visionary chief executive who envisages global Dubai.

The book's final chapter, entitled "Politicizing Dubai Space," focuses on the political splinters and possibilities within Dubai. Kanna opens the chapter describing one of the largest strikes in Dubai, which took place in 2005 when Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani construction workers struck

in protest of nonpayment of their wages and their living conditions. The threat of Dubai's South and Southeast Asian workers turning Dubai into a rebel city is one that the Maktoum dynasty is highly cognizant of. Kanna notes that the constant monitoring and disciplining of Dubai's "invisible" South Asian working class not only reinforces the ruling family's role as protector but also enables them to quell any revolt swiftly.

Kanna concludes by wondering what the Emirati female flexible citizen who noted that the cosmopolitanism of Dubai feels like a "form of indirect occupation" would think of those that fled Dubai following the financial crash (217). Would she feel that Dubai had made itself disposable? Or would she find such stories exaggerated? The answers to these questions are politically potent, and Kanna is gently speculating as to whether such questions are being posed within the households of Emirati citizens. Indeed, if Kanna's interviewee does feel that Dubai has made itself disposable, further questions arise. Is the coexistence of neoorthodoxy and flexible citizenry sustainable? Could the political and social decisions of female Emirati flexible citizens reinsert politics into Dubai's space?

In distinction to Harvey's direct call to reclaim the city for anticapitalist struggle and his focus on the urban-based working class, Kanna produces a far more contextually nuanced and indirect account of how a specific city could be organized for claims over the right to the city. Framing the right to the city solely within anticapitalist struggle misses important dynamics and other possible avenues for change. Kanna implies that politicizing the space of Dubai against its rulers can, or rather must, include parts of the ruling class—specifically the Emiratis—and that attention should be paid to gender and ethnic dimensions as well as class. Harvey ends his book with an evocative call: "Whose side will each of us, as individuals, come down on? Which street will we occupy? Only time will tell" (164). Harvey is right: it matters immensely what side particular kinds of social actors decide to come down on. We do not all have the same political and social force. Could Dubai's flexible citizens and those of a neoorthodox persuasion emerge as rebel citizens? Only time will tell.