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Commentary on 'Revolution and the critique of human geography: prospects for the right to the city after 50 years' by Don Mitchell

 OPEN ACCESS



## Arise, ye (in)debtariats of the world!

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'Revolution and the Critique of Human Geography. Prospects for the Right to the City After 50 Years' is the paper that Don Mitchell read for the plenary lecture at the 7th Nordic Geographic Meet, held in Stockholm in June 2017. The paper was the *Geografiska Annaler B* Lecture, at the invitation Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography and the conference organizers.

Proceeding from the premise that 'revolution is a geographical act', Mitchell relies on two key revolutionary thinkers *cum* protagonists to convey the profoundly spatial nature of revolution. The first, Henri Lefebvre is a well-known thinker in geographical circles not least through his oft-cited 1967 text *The Right to The City*, with the likes of David Harvey, Edward Soja, Neil Smith, Andy Merrifield, Bob Shields, Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden, and of course Don Mitchell himself, as interlocutors. The second protagonist, Guy Debord is a significant thinker in his own right, Lefebvre's former student and political antagonist, well known in Marxian, media, film and cultural theory, but not so well known in geographical circles. Debord's book *The Society of the Spectacle* (1995) is a pioneer work on commodified life, culture and power in the contemporary (Merrifield 2004). It is only apposite then that Mitchell grants Debord more space (15 entries on *The Society of the Spectacle* compared to the 4 or 5 entries on the *Right to the City*) in his deliberations on revolution. Even with the numbered format (reminiscent of Debord's numbered Theses), one can discern an introduction, corpus and a coda. In what follows, I present my take on Don Mitchell's lecture/paper by focusing on two themes. The first revolves around issues of time and history, the second is parallel readings of Debord-Mitchell on questions of space, revolution and the critique of human geography. I wind up by offering an alternative take on revolution and the critique of human geography.

### 'How to Make History Dates Stick'

Dates are like the cattle-pens of a ranch – they shut in the several brands of historical cattle, each within its own fence, and keep them from getting mixed together. (Mark Twain)

I borrow the title of a whimsical essay that Mark Twain wrote in the summer of 1899 during a sojourn in Sweden and published posthumously in *Harper's Magazine* in 1914, to discuss Mitchell's playful take on identifying specific years or dates that 'changed the world'. Twain's way of making history dates stick was to use pictorial devices, since he was convinced that these would help children learn history, get their numbers or dates straight, so to say. Mitchell too plays with the problematics of making history dates stick. Maps might have done the same trick of visualizing the dates for Mitchell, but then again he does not use maps.

In the introductory section of his lecture, Mitchell toys with the question of 'what makes a date' a significant moment? What qualifies (may qualify) as a historical event? Mitchell offers many dates that one could pick, 'when the world changed'. Should it be June 16, 1920, the day 'Wall Street

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Exploded' (à la Beverly Gage), he asks? Does not 9/11 have all the makings of 'a moment when everything changes, and that begins the world turning' (Mitchell 2018, 4)? Still, Mitchell opts out and continues to toy with other possible dates. One such moment that 'should have been revolutionary', he claims, is 2008 – the moment 'when neoliberal capitalism began its long, slow, self-inflicted death spiral' (Smith 2008, in Mitchell 2018, 1). Yet, 2008 is also shelved.

A tale that begins 'One hundred years ago ...' is tantalizing in itself, wouldn't you say? So how about 1917? For indeed, it was a momentous year. For starters, which Mitchell totally missed, it is the year of the infamous Balfour declaration. The year the British gave away territory not theirs to bestow, to Zionist colonial settlers not theirs to lay claim to. Are we not experiencing the manifold aftermaths of the ultimate colonial gesture – to this day? Talking of 1917, 'the year that changed everything', 'that fateful year' (Mitchell 2018, 1, 9), should we not then crown the Russian revolution, as the historic event of the twentieth-century *par excellence*? And yet, Mitchell gives only a passing nod to 1917. In the end Mitchell opts for a 50-year cycle and lays out the facts and arguments that make his choice – 1967 – stick. It appears that he settled for 1967 already from the start. It was the publication year for the two books central to his deliberations. Hard to go around that, won't you say? The events mentioned to buttress the choice of 1967 as an eventful year are add-ons, justifications after the fact, so to speak.

Playing with dates/years that changed the world, was perhaps Mitchell's way of reminding us, as does Gilman-Opalsky (2011, 48), that

the criteria that constitute the historical moment would effectively disqualify much of what is presently regarded as history. First, they must be unprecedented in some way either phenomenologically or in terms of the problems they pose (or resolve). And secondly, they must be world-historical in scale ...

Obviously, Mitchell is also aware that this exercise is fraught with problems – historic moments need not be breaking points, one runs the risk of exorcising space from history, not to speak of all the moments that did not make the world turn. That said, Mitchell fails to see that the game of making history dates stick smacks of teleology. For when all is said and done, the revolutionary project has Utopia as its final destination. Ironically, Mitchell is also blissfully unaware of the Eurocentrism that undergirds his playful take on 'making history dates stick'. The long list of possible dates and times when the 'world changed' (ranging from the publication of Marx's *Capital* in 1867, to 2007/2008) is dominated by episodes in Western history. Sad to say, temporal and spatial elitism – a signpost of Eurocentric epistemologies, undergirds the choice of dates and hence events under discussion. The inadvertent message being: Western history is the stuff of world turning events. The West is a space fecund with revolutionary processes and world-shaking events. Then again, I may be reading too much into Mitchell's play with dates or years. I leave that for the reader to judge.

## How to make geography stick?

Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the Shadow (T. S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men* [1925], Canto V)

Mark Twain was known for mocking the nineteenth-century craze for history, or rather the linear philosophy of history, best captured in Huck Finn's precis 'I don't take stock in dead people.' The jest aside, Huck's discerning insight questions dominant philosophies of time, memory and history. It speaks to Nietzsche's critique of antiquarian history and its penchant for 'that admiration for the "power of history" which in practice transforms every moment into naked admiration for success and leads to the idolatry of the factual' ([1874] 1997, 105). It also intimates to Massey's trenchant critique of

general conceptions of space and time (spatiality and temporality) ... in which the two are opposed to each other, and in which time is the one that matters and of which History (capital H) is made. Time Marches on but space is a kind of stasis, where nothing really happens. (1992)

This dominant conception is part of the strategy of ‘convening space in temporal terms’, such that ‘geographical differences are being reconvened in historical sequence’, which in effect is ‘a way of conceiving difference’, as a ‘place in a sequence’ (Massey 1998, 35). The denial of coevalness (Fabian 1983) is also a denial of contemporaneous existence of the ‘other’ and erasing ‘the possibility of relatively autonomous [historical] trajectories, ... the possibilities of the co-existence of a multiplicity of histories’ (Fabian 1983). Space in other words is also the domain of the new, the unexpected, the jolting – ‘the future is genuinely open’, in Massey’s memorable words (1998, 41). I reiterate Massey’s spatial critique of historicism, to bring home the message that historicism lies at the heart of Debord’s Theses on time, history, the becoming of Man and his revolutionary project. Debord’s takes on geography, space, the city, environmental planning, etc. are informed by Hegelian Marxism in which Time reigns supreme and space at best plays second fiddle. To wit Thesis 125, which begins the *Time and History* section of the Society of the Spectacle, reads:

MAN – THAT ‘NEGATIVE BEING, who is solely to the extent that he abolishes being is one with time. Man’s appropriation of his own nature is at the same time the apprehension of the unfolding of the universe. ... History has always existed but not in its historical form. The temporalization of man, as effected through the mediation of society, is equivalent to the humanization of time. The unconscious movement of time becomes manifest and true in historical consciousness. (1995)

Thesis 126: ‘Time was motionless – a sort of enclosed space.’ Debord quotes Hegel approvingly ‘The wandering of nomads is merely a formal one, because it is limited to uniform space’ (Thesis 127). Debord lays out his sequential model of time/history: ‘from a time-bound return to similar places’ of pastoralism, via the cyclical time of agricultural society – ‘a pure return of time in a single place’, to the *irreversible time* of the Renaissance and eventually capitalism (Thesis 127, emphasis in the original [e. o.]). ‘The triumph of the irreversible time was also its metamorphosis into the *time of things* ... the mass production of things in accordance with the laws of the commodity’ (Thesis 142, e. o.). With the advent of bourgeoisie society, irreversible historical time is universalized and ‘enforced on society’. ‘The development of capitalism meant the unification of irreversible time *on a world scale*’ (Thesis 145, e. o.).

Like the *Men in Grey* in Michel Ende’s memorable fantasy novel *Momo, or The Strange Story of the Time Thieves* ([1973] 1984), the bourgeoisie robs society of its time. Time is reduced to a commodity and the ‘enrollment of the workers as “free” producers and consumers of time-as-commodity was the *violent expropriation of their time*’ (Thesis 159, e. o.). ‘The irreversible time of production is first and foremost the measure of commodities. The time officially promoted all around the world as the *general time of society*’ (Thesis 146, e. o.). Global time, universal history and uniform space:

Universal history became a reality because the entire globe was brought under the sway of this time’s progression. But a history that is thus the same everywhere at once [*sic*] has as yet amounted to nothing more than intrahistorical refusal of history ... – time cut up into equal abstract fragments. Unified irreversible time still belongs to the world market – and by extension to the world spectacle. (Thesis 146)

The musings on irreversible, universal time, lead Debord to envisage the prospects for ‘the revolutionary project, a classless society, of a generalized historical life, [which] is also the project of a withering away of the social measurement of time in favor of an individual and collective irreversible time’ (Thesis 163). Echoing Lefebvre’s (1991) takes on leisure and differential space as domains for the realization of man’s full being, the temporal regime of the revolutionary project is

playful in character, and encompasses, simultaneously present within it, a variety of autonomous yet effectively federated times – the complete realization, in short, within the medium time, of that community, of that communism which ‘abolishes everything that exists independently of individuals’. (Thesis 163)

Only then can ‘the possibility of relatively autonomous [historical] trajectories, ... the possibilities of the co-existence of a multiplicity of histories’ (Thesis 163) be realized. Only after tortuous journeys and revolutionary upheavals, will time-spaces or space-times and coevalness (Fabian 1983) be fully actuated. Perhaps only then, can we envisage space as difference, space as the realm of becoming and

spaces that ooze the unexpected, come into full bloom. But first the *Time of Utopia!* For only post-Utopia, can the world gain ‘the consciousness that will allow it to experience reality’. In effect, the end of the society of the spectacle is the beginning of the era of space, a space that enables playfulness and community to flourish (1995).

Although Debord notes that we live in ‘an *estranged present*’, a condition of ‘*spatial alienation*, whereby a society which radically severs the subject from the activity that it steals from him [*sic*] separates him in the first place from his own time’ (Thesis 163), his antidote to alienation is temporal and not spatial. One could, and should, reverse the historicism of Debord, stand it on its head so to speak and place space at the centre. Philosophically speaking, what is time if not an abstract intellectual concept, a convenient way of naming and distinguishing different *states of space*? The philosopher Taggart went even so far as to claim time is unreal (McTaggart 1908). Moreover, is it not spatial dispossession that adumbrates universal irreversible time? It is first when land becomes private property that private ownership of social time and history becomes a possibility. Mitchell rightfully criticizes Debord for not paying enough attention to the question of immiseration (2018, 10). The differential geographies of the spectacle did not figure in any significant way in Debord’s analysis/diagnosis of capitalism. Immiseration adorns the prime society of the spectacle – ca. 50% of the US population now lives below the poverty line. The telos undergirding Debord’s coming Utopia downplays the implications of the differential geographies of capitalism. The closest he comes to acknowledging the differential geographies of the spectacle is in Thesis 58:

... even in its local manifestations the spectacle may embody totalitarian varieties of social communication and control, when viewed from the standpoint of the system’s global functioning these are seen merely to be different aspects of a *worldwide division of spectacular tasks*. (1995)

Spatial absolutism in spectacular attire lays space underneath the carpet of time. Surely Debord could not have missed Fanon’s (1961) damning critique of colonialism, Marxian theories of revolution and the role of the proletariat? Mitchell too fails to take note of this critique. Fanon did not mince words: the western proletariat benefits from and is in cahoots with colonialism/imperialism. It does not give a damn about proletarians of colour. Yet, Debord speaks of the ‘proletarian revolution as a critique of human geography’ and how the task ahead, as Mitchell approvingly notes as well, is to construct places commensurate with the total history and labour of the proletariat (Thesis 178).

## Arise, ye (in)debtariats of the world!

What is robbing a bank compared to founding a bank? (Bertolt Brecht 1979)

Mitchell discusses questions of revolution (in singular throughout the text), geography/space, history/time, and muses on ‘the falling rate of use-value’ in the main corpus of the lecture. In the final section, Mitchell re-turns to the question of *usefulness* and claims that ‘The right to the city – the appropriation of our total history – must begin, in other words, by making the city (and of course the countryside to which it is attached and upon which it mutually depends) *useful*’ (2018, 12, e. o.). Following the Situationist credo, this entails ‘expropriating space and making it different’, and given that there is no outside to the Empire of the Spectacle, spectacle is the planetary sovereign, revolutionary strategies would have to aspire ‘to create a new world within the shell of the pretty damn useless old: to *infuse* the old with a new usefulness, to give it a new use-value’ (2018, 13), alternatively ‘to make the world anew’ by reversing it, via ‘*détournement*’ – reversal, and by being adept at ‘biding out time’. Having noted that as revolutionary strategy this falls flat and is dejecting, Mitchell reads Debord’s prescription to make the world anew to mean acts of ‘illegitimate appropriation’, i.e. expropriation of space as the prospect for its *occupation*. Only then can ‘*time* [history] be remade’ and ‘the falling *rate* of use value can be slowed or even reversed’ (2018, 13–14, e. o.). To expropriate and appropriate space/place (*topos*) is to also (re)appropriate life, since as Heidegger underscored place/topos is the very stuff of existence and comes before essence (Elden 2001). It is in this sense that I read Mitchell’s claim that to ‘appropriate and then to bide’ – ‘to remain or stay in a certain

place is the immanent *critique* of human geography. It is the establishment of a right to the city' (2018, 14, e. o.).

Mitchell's takes on *détournement*, reversal left me wondering that perhaps we are dealing with nostalgic ideas of *retro-revolution*? In any case, to bide is at the same time to bow to a specific temporal regime. To bide time is to stay put, to know one's place and to submit. Since we are dealing with events and dates that (may or may not) have changed the course of history, one way to engage Mitchell's ideas would be by invoking Nietzsche's take on history and the status of history as historical knowledge. To Nietzsche, the value of historical knowledge, and pretty damn everything else, has to be judged in relation to the question: Is it ennobling? Does it affirm and enhance life, or is it life diminishing? If my reading of Mitchell's call as a retro-revolution is right, then what we have is an unintended 'idolatry of (antiquarian) history' in the Nietzschean sense ([1874] 1997).

Secondly, though I concur with Mitchell when he states that 'critique (of human geography) has to be immanent if it is to be any good' (2018, 15), I am puzzled by what is on offer. Mitchell uses the critique of human geography as an entry point for his critique of Situationist praxis. A cynic might say Situationist praxis is part and parcel of the spectacle. Not so Mitchell who argues instead that the task of making the world anew is about how 'to create a new world within the shell of the old', the womb of the old', we need to 'infuse the old with a *new usefulness*, to give it a *new use-value*, and in the process to upend and even reverse the *falling rate of use value*' (2018, emphasis added [e. a.]).

What is to be done is to *take* space, and in doing so to make the *critique* of human geography material, and, in the shell of the old, make spaces where we can *abide* – or as Lefebvre would have it, inhabit – in ways that are now use-full.' (2018, 14, e. o.)

Thus concludes Mitchell's exposé. Yet, the question is, *how*? On that score, Mitchell has not much to offer that is *use-full*, leaving this reader wondering whether the revolution has been indefinitely deferred? Is retro-revolution and spectacular nostalgia all that is left of revolutionary aspirations?

An alternative reading of Mitchell's new (use)-values might take cue from Nietzsche's call for a re-evaluation of all values, overturning existing tables of values to bring forth life-enhancing, life-affirming and ennobling values (Nietzsche 1954). As Deleuze noted (1995, 181) 'man is no longer man, but man in debt'. What diminishes man more than debt? Critical history, in the sense that Nietzsche understood it to mean – is one that is alert to its own flaws and fiascos, a perspective that shuns slavish blindness to doctrine. 'History itself *must* dissolve the problem of history, knowledge must turn its barbs against itself' (Nietzsche [1874] 1997, 45, e. o.). A key lesson of critical history ought then to be that the transvaluation of all values via a proletarian revolution is a chimera. Exorcise the (proletarian) ghosts haunting the revolutionary project! For the real power of capital lies not in industry anymore (if it ever did), rather in the financial sector. In Sweden, for instance, growth is no longer export-led but rather debt-led. The asset values of the four major banks of Sweden are *four times* the size of the GNP of Sweden, which is exceptionally high even by international standards (Belfrage and Kallifatides 2017). Financial and *rentier* capital has gained control of the global economy at the expense of industrial capitalism and states, notes renowned critical economist Hudson (2015). The single most important issue is that 'between creditors and democracy, between oligarchy and economic growth (and indeed survival) will remain the defining issue of our epoch over the next generation and probably for the remainder of the 21<sup>st</sup> century'.

The true revolutionary force, one with the potential of transvaluating all values, consists of none other than the (*in*)*debtariat*, the human mass of debt-slaves. The true revolutionary task is to take control over the power of issuing *fiat* money, speculative capital and debt – *Bankocracy* as Marx dubbed it (2001, I 1079–80), what David Harvey called the 'state-finance nexus' (2010). Thus the true revolutionary task is how to undo the regime of Bankocracy, how to overthrow the state-finance nexus: *how to make man, man once again, how to save man from debt-slavery*. For what is the empire of Bankocracy? T. S. Eliot provides an intimation:

This is the dead land  
This is the cactus land

Here the stone images  
 Are raised, here they receive  
 The supplication of a dead man's hand  
 Under the twinkle of a fading star (T. S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men* [1925], ç)

The clarion call ought then to be: 'Arise, ye (in)debtariats of the world!', for you have nothing to lose but your debts. Liberate (wo)man from the vampirism of debt-slavery! Only then can the Right to the City (Lefebvre 1996) come to fruition. A critical human geography will be one that lives up to this task, and *this task only*.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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