



# POSSIBLE WORLDS: HENRI LEFEBVRE AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

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**ABSTRACT:** *There has been much attention paid recently the idea of the right to the city. This article argues that in order to fully appreciate the power of the idea, we should understand it through a close reading of Henri Lefebvre's body of work on the city and politics. Lefebvre presents a radical vision for a city in which users manage urban space for themselves, beyond the control of both the state and capitalism. However, while it calls for profound change, Lefebvre's vision is also eminently practical; it can very much serve as a guide and inspiration for concrete action to change the city today.*

The inferno of the living is not something that will be. If there is one, it is that which is already here, the inferno that we inhabit every day, that we create by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for most: accept the inferno and become such a complete part of it that you no longer know it is there. The second is risky and requires vigilance and continuous attention: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, and help them endure, give them space.

—Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (1972, p. 164, my translation)

Over the past decade or so, the right to the city has become one of the more talked-about concepts in urban studies. In policy circles, in the academy, and among activists, it is frequently invoked and championed. UN-HABITAT and UNESCO have led an effort to conceptualize the right to the city as part of a broader agenda for human rights (UNESCO, 2006; UN-HABITAT, 2010; Sugranyes & Mathivet, 2010). The goal is to encourage urban policies that promote justice, sustainability, and inclusion in cities. A related effort is to develop charters that articulate a right to the city, such as the World Charter for the Right to the City, the European Charter for Human Rights in the City, and the Montreal Charter of Rights and Responsibilities. In Brazil, the right to the city has been codified in a national law, the City Statute (Fernandes, 2006). Activists have also taken up the idea. A network of community organizations in the United States called the Right to the City Alliance was launched in 2007. A similar effort began in Europe in 2010. Academics, for their part, have also been increasingly fascinated with the idea. Multiple conferences have examined the right to the city, in Toronto, Rome, Berlin, Sweden, and elsewhere. And there is no shortage of written scholarship as well (e.g., Purcell, 2002; Mitchell, 2003; Dikec, 2007; Leavitt, Samara, & Brady, 2009; Marcuse, 2009; Harvey, 2008; Attoh, 2011; Mayer, 2012).

While this burgeoning interest in the right to the city has been exciting and productive, there has also been a measure of conceptual bloating, in that the frequency with which the idea is used has tended to make its meaning increasingly indistinct. For example, the World Charter for the Right to the City seems to include so many rights—to cultural memory, telecommunications, retraining, day care, the removal of architectural barriers, and so forth—that the right to the city seems to be at the same time everything and nothing. This bloating is a real danger, but it should not push us too far in the other direction, toward a single orthodox interpretation. We need multiple formulations

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of the right to the city, but each should be specific in its conception and transparent in its political content. Such multiple, specific formulations can engender a sustained debate about the best way to understand the idea. This paper aims to contribute to that project by elaborating and advocating for one particular way to understand the right to the city. I offer a close examination of the work of Henri Lefebvre, who is often thought to be the progenitor of the idea, to argue that when we understand the right to the city with Lefebvre, in the context of his larger body of work, we discover perhaps the most radical right to the city possible. Lefebvre does not see the right to the city as an incremental addition to existing liberal-democratic rights. He sees it as an essential element of a wider political struggle for revolution.

## CONTEMPORARY INITIATIVES

Before I turn to Lefebvre's revolutionary vision, however, let me first say something more generally about how the right to the city is conceived. Across the academic, policy, and activist circles mentioned above, there are some values that almost all versions of the right to the city share. Nearly everyone emphasizes the figure of the user or the inhabitant of urban space. Most agree that it is the everyday experience of inhabiting the city that entitles one to a right to the city, rather than one's nation-state citizenship. As a result, most also emphasize the importance of the use value of urban space over and above its exchange value. Currently, in almost every city in the world, the property rights of owners outweigh the use rights of inhabitants, and the exchange value of property determines how it is used much more so than its use value. And so in almost all its forms the right to the city is understood to be a struggle to augment the rights of urban inhabitants against the property rights of owners.

As we will see, this emphasis on use and inhabitation has its roots in Lefebvre's work. However, there is also a stark gap between his radical conception of the right to the city and most contemporary initiatives. Those initiatives tend to conceive of the right to the city in a way that remains mostly within a liberal-democratic framework. Liberal democracy, which derives from John Locke's (2004/1689) writing on the state, is a form of the nation-state that grants people a relatively weak measure of democratic control through elections, parties, laws, and stable state institutions. It also values individual liberty and strives to protect it by establishing a strong distinction between the public and private spheres, and by granting individuals numerous rights designed to prevent limitations to their liberty either by fellow citizens or by the state. In this political imagination, rights are enduring legal protections that are granted to individual citizens by the liberal-democratic state. This tradition tends to understand the right to the city, then, as a proposed addition to the list of existing liberal-democratic rights. It trains its political attention squarely on the state, since that is the institution that will guarantee any future right to the city. This approach tends to think of political action in terms of legal strategies. And it conceives of rights as ends: when a legal right is secured, the struggle has come to a close. Lefebvre, as we will see, imagined the right to the city entirely differently: as a cry that initiated a radical struggle to move *beyond* both the state and capitalism. My aim in this section is therefore to set the stage, to give the reader an idea of the general drift of contemporary initiatives in order to make clear the difference between those initiatives and Lefebvre's idea.

One of the earliest initiatives for the right to the city emerged in Brazil, where organizations among the urban poor, especially in the favelas of the large cities, began to advocate for a right to the city for slum dwellers. Their work helped bring about and shape a federal law commonly known as the City Statute, which comprehensively regulates urban development (Rodrigues & Barbosa, 2010). One element of the law calls for the "regularization" of informal settlements in Brazilian cities, integrating them over time into the formal state and economic sectors. The law also establishes that the development of urban land (whether in the formal sector or in the favelas) should be determined not only by its exchange value, but also by the "social use value" of the land and its surrounding area (Fernandes, 2006). The law thus means that the Brazilian state must recognize explicitly that urban space serves a complex social function in addition to its economic function. However, it does not seek to move beyond property rights; it merely seeks to balance the interests of property owners with the

social needs of urban inhabitants. The law asserts that property rights are no longer *more* important than other concerns. They are still firmly in place, but now they must coexist with social use value. They are contingent on whether the proposed development provides an adequate contribution to social needs.

The City Statute serves as an important inspiration and precedent for groups elsewhere advocating a right to the city. Another inspiration is the tradition of human rights. Here the right to the city is seen as part of the larger project of human rights most associated with the Universal Declaration of the United Nations. Sometimes the right to the city is advanced by the United Nations (UN) itself, under the auspices of institutions like UN-HABITAT, UNESCO, and the World Urban Forum. Sometimes initiatives are advanced by non-UN groups that appeal directly to the human rights tradition, often partnering strategically with UN institutions. The initiatives here are diverse, but in the main their goal is to argue that the right to the city should be seen as a human right, and that governments must honor that right and guarantee it for their citizens (Mayer, 2012). In this tradition, it is common to see “charters” that propose new rights for governments to add to their legal codes. Thus, for example, the Charter for Women’s Right to the City calls on local governments to honor rights to equal access for women to government, secure housing tenure, urban services, physical safety, and freedom from gender discrimination of all kinds (Habitat International Coalition, 2005). Quite instructive is the document’s section on “Democratic Territorial Management,” which has to do with decisions made by local government. The concern is to ensure that women have equal access to government decisions about the city, as when the proposal calls for “the institutionalization of women’s machineries as a structure of local city government with their own budget, thus guaranteeing gender mainstreaming in all areas of municipal action and in local governments public policies, programs and plans.” This goal is commonly referred to in UN circles as “inclusion,” the desire to integrate currently excluded groups into the structures of government and the formal economy. To be clear, the charter is identifying a very real problem. Equal access for women to the power and resources of government will result in important material gains for people who are currently discriminated against. However, I want to highlight that the right to the city here, as the right to be fully included in the machinery of the state, differs fundamentally from how Lefebvre understood the idea, as a revolutionary movement to *go beyond* the state, as we will see.

A similar initiative that has made more progress in terms of official recognition is the Montreal Charter of Rights and Responsibilities. After a long process of consultation between city government and civil society groups, the Charter was adopted by the municipality of Montreal in 2006. It is intended to be a memorandum of understanding between the municipality and its citizens. The Charter defines “citizens” as “any person living within the city territory” (City of Montreal, 2006). That is, their formal nation-state citizenship is not necessary to their membership in the urban political community. The Charter refers directly to the UN human rights tradition as precedent and inspiration, and it proposes a large number of new rights for citizens, such as participation in urban decisions, affordable housing, cultural rights, physical safety, municipal services, and sustainable development. This appears to be the state adding new formal rights to those rights they already guarantee. But it is not quite that. Rather it is something more like a joint declaration by the state and citizens to work to ensure that citizens enjoy these rights (City of Montreal, 2006). While the charter “is binding on the municipality,” the municipality is not bound *legally*. Rather, as Article 32 states,

Any citizen who believes that he or she has been wronged . . . may file a complaint with the ombudsman. This Charter is not intended to serve as the basis for a legal action nor to be used in a judicial or quasi-judicial form. (City of Montreal, 2006)

If the ombudsman thinks the claim has merit, he or she can try to mediate the conflict. If that fails, there is no specific recourse, other than for the ombudsman to issue a report validating the claim and file it with the municipality. So, while the charter has been ratified, it is not yet binding legally, and so its rights are not fully codified. From the perspective of a liberal-democratic understanding of

rights, these are really “quasi-rights” that are not yet fully realized rights. But nevertheless the end goal is clearly to eventually establish these rights as formal legal protections guaranteed by the state.

In addition to the Charter for Women’s Right to the City and the Montreal Charter, there are many similar initiatives working in this human rights vein. These include the Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City (Wigle & Zarate, 2010), the European Charter for Safeguarding Human Rights in the City,<sup>1</sup> the World Charter of the Right to the City,<sup>2</sup> the Global Charter-Agenda for Human Rights in the City advanced by a group called United Cities and Local Governments,<sup>3</sup> and so on. These initiatives are diverse, of course, but in the main they share this human rights imagination of the right to the city, in which it is a right that that ultimately reaches its fullest form when it is codified and guaranteed by the liberal-democratic state.

One last cluster of activity also bears mentioning, which is the recent emergence of networks of activist groups that have organized under the right to the city as an umbrella idea. The most developed example of this strategy is in the United States, where the national Right to the City Alliance<sup>4</sup> brings together community-based organizations in an effort to achieve a wider scalar impact on various urban problems. Member of Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) work on issues such as gentrification, environmental justice, homelessness, cultural preservation, juvenile justice, and the well-being of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) youth. Inspired greatly by the experience of Brazil, part of the idea is to pass national urban development legislation that balances property rights with the social use value of urban land. While the Alliance evokes the human rights tradition in their understanding of the right to the city, it does so only very loosely. Their efforts do not tend to associate greatly with UN institutions. Of course given the coalitional structure and the range of issues that member CBOs work on, there are many different political desires at work in the alliance. Their mission statement acknowledges Lefebvre as an influence as well as the tradition of human rights. They emphasize the importance of community members mobilizing and taking direct control of their own neighborhoods (e.g., through food cooperatives or community gardens), but they also work for more inclusion in the state apparatus, through policy initiatives (e.g., participatory budgeting) and voter registration efforts. The Alliance is, in sum, a broad and searching effort by civil society groups to experiment with and learn about the political utility of the right to the city idea.

Having characterized the liberal-democratic tendencies of most contemporary initiatives, I now turn to a close examination of Lefebvre’s understanding of the right to the city, which I read in the context of his wider political vision for revolution.

## HENRI LEFEBVRE AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

### Background

Henri Lefebvre was a French intellectual whose career spanned most of the twentieth century. His work ranges widely, from radical philosophy to rural sociology to urban studies to state theory. His thought is held together, however, by an unwavering commitment to the project of imagining and achieving revolutionary change in human society. Inspired principally by Marx, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, Lefebvre’s political and intellectual project was to offer a critique of existing society in order to open up a path to another society, a possible world beyond capitalism, the state, and consumer society. It would be fair to call this new society socialist, a society inspired in many respects by the one invoked by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*. But like many radical thinkers in France during the 1960s and 1970s, Lefebvre was deeply critical of the totalitarian state socialism that came to exist in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China. Many of his peers, such as Cornelius Castoriadis, Guy Debord, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Michel Foucault, were all appalled by Stalinism, both in the Soviet Union and in the French Communist Party of the time. As a result, the work of all these thinkers is as much a reaction against the state and bureaucratic domination as it is against capitalism. So it is important to be clear just what Lefebvre understood socialism to be. It is not at all a bureaucratic socialism in which the state is seized and dominated

by a workers' party. Rather, as we will see, his socialism insists on the withering away of the state and the collective self-governing of society. Moreover, it is not an already worked-out and ideal society. It is rather an open project, one that moves us in a direction, toward a horizon beyond the present capitalist and state-bureaucratic society, but whose precise outcomes cannot be fully known.

As that understanding of socialism might suggest, although Lefebvre was very much a Marxist, he was by no means an orthodox one. One way his heterodoxy manifests is in an affinity for the young Marx, particularly "On the Jewish Question," the "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," and the 1844 manuscripts. As compared to Marx's later work, especially *Capital*, in these earlier works he gives relatively less attention to a critique of capitalism and more to an exploration of what people might be capable of if they were to be free of bourgeois domination in all its forms. Lefebvre is particularly inspired here by Marx's critique of the state, and it is that critique, along with Lenin's *State and Revolution*, that forms the basis of Lefebvre's argument against the state (Lefebvre, 1976–1978; Lefebvre, 2009, see esp. chap. 2). And so what emerges in Lefebvre's work is a Marxism that rejects the state, that maintains itself as an open and evolving project, and that comes to understand itself as more than anything a democratic project, as a struggle by people to shake off the control of capital and the state in order to manage their affairs for themselves. Thus his politics can appear at times to be quite a lot closer to anarcho-syndicalism or libertarian socialism than to Marxism. But that is only true, Lefebvre would insist, because we have fallen into the habit of taking *Marxism* to mean an affinity for Marx's critique of capital in his later works. We have become consumed by this critique and have neglected to theorize alternative forms of life (see Brenner & Elden, 2009, pp. 38–39). As a result, the default agenda of Marxism, which is an inadequate one, has become for a worker's party to seize the state and abolish classes and the property relation. "Revolution," Lefebvre says, "was long defined either in terms of the political change at the level of the state or else in terms of the collective or state ownership of the means of production . . . Today such limited definitions of revolution will no longer suffice" (1991/1974, p. 422).

Another element of Lefebvre's heterodoxy was to rail against both class reductionism and economism. Lefebvre decried reductionism in all its guises, from the class reductionism of many Marxists to the capitalist desire to reduce all human value to its economic value. He advocated relentlessly for a more holistic understanding of social life, one that is always attentive to the many aspects of human experience (Lefebvre, 1991/1974). One way he tried to do this, as we will see, was to foreground the question of space in general and the city in particular. He hoped that an analysis of space, and specifically of the "lived spaces" that people actually experience, would be able to apprehend human life as a complex whole and avoid reducing our understanding of experience to small fractions of life, such as class status, gender, race, income, consumer habits, marital status, and so on. Similarly, Lefebvre sought to open up an understanding of the city as a complex whole, as a teeming multitude of different desires and drives that are not reducible to economic imperatives (1970; 1972). Here he ran up against criticism from a more economic view of the city, from scholars like David Harvey (1973) and Manuel Castells (1977/1972), who understood the city and urban space as mostly the result of the capitalist production process. In this context, we can read Lefebvre's attention to space and the urban as a way to break open the limits of an economic approach, to theorize actors beyond class actors, political sites beyond the workplace (cf. Lefebvre, 1991/1974, p. 386), and historical forces beyond economic production.<sup>5</sup> Lefebvre was accused by the orthodoxy of giving space too much autonomy, of having abandoned the conviction that the economic base of society determines space in the last instance. A long and winding debate ensued about the importance of space in urban society, primarily in urban studies and geography (Soja, 1980, 1985; Fainstein & Fainstein, 1982; Massey, 1984; Logan & Molotch, 1987; Katznelson, 1992, esp. chap. 3; see also Smith, 2003). Though there is still some diversity among scholars in this tradition, the overall arc of development has been a tendency to move beyond the relatively more economic and class reductionist arguments of the early Harvey (1973) and Castells (1977), and that development resonates with Lefebvre's avowedly holistic approach to the city (see especially Robles-Duran, 2012; also Lefebvre, 2003b, 1991/1974).



### Why a *Right to the City*?

With that background in mind, we can more fully understand how Lefebvre understood the right to the city. Near the end of his life, working with a group of activists and scholars in Naverrenx, Lefebvre wrote an essay that outlines his project for radical politics (2003a/1990, 1990). He argues that such a project requires what he calls a new “contract of citizenship.” This seems odd, given that Marxists have tended to ignore questions of citizenship and rights. Lefebvre acknowledges this, admitting that rights are generally agreed to be liberal-democratic, or what he would call a bourgeois, project. But as usual he works against the grain to argue that it is possible to recapture a revolutionary potential from the project of rights. He says that modern citizenship takes the form of a contract between the state and the citizenry that specifies, among other things, the rights of citizens (2003a/1990, p. 250). But the current contract and its associated rights have remained much the same since their inception in the eighteenth century. What we require, he argues, is to radically extend and deepen the contract, to articulate a new and augmented set of rights, and to struggle to achieve them. He lists many different rights, among them rights to information, to difference, to self-management, and a right to the city.

I will expand on the last two rights in a moment, but first let me say a bit more about how Lefebvre understands rights. For Lefebvre formal, legal rights are never God-given, nor are they natural rights that the framers of constitutions simply write down. Rather rights are always the outcome of political struggle. They are the manifestation, the end result of collective claims made by mobilized citizens. Because they result from struggle, they are always subject to further struggle, to renewed political agitation. This way of viewing rights means that for Lefebvre the point of proposing the new rights in the contract is prefigurative: they are political claims to possible rights that will require mobilization and struggle. His goal in articulating these new rights is precisely to initiate this struggle. Because the new contract is a radically extended and deepened version of the present one, the struggle for it must be concomitantly thoroughgoing. It would involve people in all sectors of society becoming active and reclaiming political power from the state. Citizens throughout civil society would become more and more active, radically active; they would increasingly take over governing functions from the state, to the point that they could eventually absorb it. As a result, the state would wither away.

This vision draws very heavily from the one Marx presents in “On the Jewish Question.” Marx imagines there that the citizenry would eventually reappropriate their own power, power the modern liberal-bourgeois state had expropriated from them (Marx, 1994/1844; Lefebvre, 2009, pp. 77–78). Here Marx is working both with and against the basic logic of the state laid down by Hobbes and Locke, who imagined the original “social contract” to be one in which citizens agree to give up their own power to the state in exchange for security.<sup>6</sup> For Marx, the contract institutes an illegitimate separation between state and civil society, one that grants the state an autonomous existence and installs it as sovereign power over people in civil society. Marx wants to close that separation, to reabsorb the state into the body of the people. Lefebvre’s goal is the same. He hopes that enshrining a new set of rights in the new contract can begin the project of activating people in order to close the gap between state and citizenry. The new contract, he hopes, “diminishes, to the point of eventually doing away with it, the distance between the institutional power of the state on the one hand and citizens in civil society on the other” (Lefebvre, 1990, p. 32, my translation).

Again, Lefebvre saw this new contract and its rights only as a beginning of a long political struggle:

The new political contract I propose will be only a *point of departure* for initiatives, ideas, even interpretations. This is not a dogmatic text. What is important is that this idea of contractual citizenship *gives rise to a renewal of political life*: a movement that has historic roots, roots in revolution, in Marxism, in production and productive labor. But the movement must go beyond ideology so that new forces enter into action, come together, and bear down on the established order. This movement would accomplish democratically a project that has been abandoned: the dictatorship of the proletariat. It would lead, without brutality, to the withering away of the state. (1990, p. 37, emphasis added, my translation)

So Lefebvre sees a struggle for new rights and a new contract as initiating a “renewal of political life” that sets us on a path, moving toward a horizon, toward a possible world beyond the state and beyond capitalism. Here and in other writing, Lefebvre makes clear that this possible world is deeply influenced by what he specifies is a Marxist-Leninist vision for the dictatorship of the proletariat and the withering away of the state (Lefebvre, 2009, esp. chap. 2). Lefebvre insisted on the idea of a dictatorship of the proletariat, through which the overwhelming majority of society comes to control the decisions that determine that society. “Today, as a Marxist,” he declares, “I FULLY RECOGNIZE the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat” (2009, p. 87). However, prompted by his strident critique of Stalinism, Lefebvre is adamant that this dictatorship cannot be imposed by a vanguard party that has seized the state. Rather its control of society must emerge spontaneously from below. For that reason, even though he retains the term, he is talking less about what we would call a dictatorship and more about a situation in which the emergent power of the proletariat comes to pervade society and displace bourgeois rule. He argues that, imagined this way, the dictatorship of the proletariat constitutes a deepening of democracy, because it means the large majority of society assumes control from the small minority that had previously governed (2009, p. 157). Such a dictatorship would mean that the vast majority of people have decided to take up the responsibility of managing their own affairs for themselves. As they become more and more effective at doing so, the state apparatus will appear increasingly unnecessary, and it will begin to wither away. The withering away of the state is absolutely non-negotiable for Lefebvre, not only because it was central to the politics of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, but because of what Lefebvre calls “the Stalinist distortion.” He argues that Stalinism turned away from Marxist-Leninist theory, which insisted on a radical critique of every state as “a machine elevated above society” (2009, p. 86). Stalinism did the opposite: it glorified the state and put it beyond all criticism. It produced a monstrous state socialism that replaced the rule of a bourgeois minority with the rule of a bureaucratic minority. For Lefebvre, nothing could be further from Marx’s vision than the state socialism that was erected in Marx’s name.

As I suggest above, the Stalinist distortion of Marxist-Leninist politics spurred a search among radicals in Lefebvre’s time for an alternative way to conceive of a socialist agenda. A strong current in this alternative tradition, one pursued by Lefebvre and contemporaries like Castoriadis, Debord, and Raoul Vaneigem, centered on the idea of *autogestion*.<sup>7</sup> The word is usually translated as “self-management,” but that is a bit of an innocuous phrase. It refers specifically to workers in a factory who take control of the means of production and manage production themselves, in place of the capitalist or his hired managers. Conceived this way, self-management is a radical attack on the foundations of capitalist social relations in which the bourgeoisie controls, through private ownership, the means of production. Typically this kind of self-management would be carried out by a workers’ council, a body that makes decisions about production collectively. Some such councils are made up of the whole population of workers in a factory. Others have a representative structure with elected delegates, although those delegates usually serve for a fixed term, on a rotating basis, and can be recalled at any time. Historically self-managed factories resulted from workers seizing a factory and operating it themselves, as in the Fiat occupations in Turin and Milan in 1919–1920 (Hoare & Smith, 1971, pp. xliii–xliv). In other cases, such as in Besançon, France in 1973 or Buenos Aires starting in 2001, factories abandoned by deindustrialization have been “recuperated” by workers.<sup>8</sup> In most cases, the state, in the form of the police or army, judges the occupation to be illegal because the workers are not the lawful owners of the factory or its means of production.

Building on and extending this tradition of factory occupations and workers’ councils, Lefebvre and others generalize the idea of *autogestion* to imagine self-management in all areas of life. The most important of these areas for Lefebvre is the state, as we have seen. *Autogestion* in that context means people managing collective decisions themselves rather than surrendering those decisions to a cadre of state officials (Lefebvre, 2003b/1970, pp. 187–188). Such *autogestion* insists on grassroots decision making and the decentralization of control to autonomous local units. And because it refuses to turn over responsibility to a managerial class, *autogestion* requires a great awakening on the part of regular people (Lefebvre, 2009, p. 135; Lefebvre, 2003b/1970, p. 27; see also Debord, 1983/1967). Lefebvre says that “each time a social group . . . refuses to accept passively its conditions of existence,

of life, or of survival, each time such a group forces itself not only to understand but to master its own conditions of existence, *autogestion* is occurring” (2009, p. 135). As *autogestion* develops, as it becomes generalized throughout society, people increasingly realize their own power. They come to see themselves as perfectly capable of managing their affairs on their own.<sup>9</sup> As a result, institutions of control, like the corporation and the state, begin to make less and less sense. They begin to wither away (Lefebvre, 2009, p. 147). And so the right to *autogestion* or self-management is prominent among the rights in Lefebvre’s new contract of citizenship. Though it appears unremarkable on the surface, and is easy to skip over in a long list of rights, the right to self-management has coded within it an unequivocal vision for revolutionary social change.

### Why a Right to the City?

In addition to the right to *autogestion*, Lefebvre’s new contract also includes a right to the city. This right too is easily underestimated or understood in a way that makes it anodyne. But it also implies revolutionary change. What the right to the city adds for Lefebvre is a deeply spatial understanding of politics, and in particular an understanding of politics that places urban space at the very center of its vision. “Any revolutionary project today,” he writes in *The Production of Space* (1991/1974, pp. 166–167), “whether utopian or realistic, must, if it is to avoid hopeless banality, make the reappropriation of the body, in association with the reappropriation of space, into a non-negotiable part of its agenda.” “Revolution,” he goes on to say,

was long defined either in terms of the political change at the level of the state or else in terms of the collective or state ownership of the means of production . . . . Today such limited definitions of revolution will no longer suffice. The transformation of society presupposes a collective ownership and *management of space* founded on the permanent participation of the “interested parties,” with their multiple, varied and even contradictory interests. (1991/1974, p. 422, emphasis added)

Those “interested parties” are the users of space, those who actively *inhabit* space in the course of their daily lives. For Lefebvre those users, and the city they inhabit, are vital elements of the Marxist-Leninist project he advocates.

Early in his career, Lefebvre was a rural sociologist. In the 1960s, however, his focus shifted. “One fine day,” he wrote, “I noticed that the peasant question was no longer decisive, that revolutions had been fundamentally peasant based for several decades, but that this was now over. It was necessary to study the urban questions that were emerging” (2009, p. 161). The decisive struggle in society, he felt, the engine of historical change, was now located in the city. For Lefebvre the city’s importance is closely linked to capitalist industrialization. In his mind this relation is a complex one. Like many Marxists, Lefebvre understood the city to be profoundly shaped by industrial capitalism. As we saw, however, he rejected the economic idea that the city is merely the spatial product of industrialization. Rather he insisted that the city, and more specifically the process of urbanization, constitutes an autonomous force of its own (see especially 2003b/1970). Cities existed before industrial capitalism, he reasons, and so they are a human phenomenon that is not fully encompassed by industrialization. Industrialization does not create cities from nothing. What it does is to massively intensify the already existing process of urbanization. It not only speeds urbanization up, but it extends urbanization across space, making it a global phenomenon (2003b/1970, pp. 14–15). But because the city is to an extent an autonomous entity, Lefebvre argues that what is going on in the world today is that industrialization is stirring up a powerful force it cannot fully control (2003b/1970, p. 61). For him the city is not only the context in which industrial capitalism developed most fully, but it also contains the seeds of the destruction of capitalism. Moreover, the city is already producing, here and there, the beginnings of an alternative society beyond capitalism. As a result, he argues, it is not possible to understand and resist capitalism without understanding and reimagining the city (1996, esp. chap. 3).

To unpack this question, Lefebvre makes a clear distinction between *the city* and “*the urban*.”<sup>10</sup> The contemporary “city” is the capitalist city, which for him is not “the urban” at all, but merely



an impoverished manifestation of it, an urban world reduced to its economic elements (2003b/1970, p. 35). He argues that capitalist industrialization imposes itself on the city by asserting the primacy of exchange value. It seeks to make everything in the city, including space itself, reducible to economic exchange, to a marketable commodity. It envisions the consumption of commodities to be the supreme activity.<sup>11</sup> Central to this project is the property relation. Under capitalism the space of the city is carved up into isolated segments by the system of private property. The system is hegemonic, and property rights dominate all other claims to the space of the city. The production of space is thus driven by the needs of property owners. Capitalism then manages that commodified space in a particular way. It segregates uses into discrete zones by producing detailed plans for land use (Lefebvre, 1991/1974, p. 317). This functional separation of uses, in addition to various forms of residential segregation, separates users from each other, storing them in sterilized spaces Lefebvre calls *habitat*, and preventing them from coming together in spaces of encounter, play, and interaction (2003b/1970, p. 109). This separation is parallel to the specialization and compartmentalization characteristic of the capitalist division of labor.

To take an archetypical example, when a developer buys a plot of land, he or she acquires property rights that confer extensive control over what that land will become. According to the regime of property rights, the role of that land in the everyday life of the surrounding community need not be considered. Those who inhabit the area need not play a role in decisions about the land. A property rights regime works to separate the land from the surrounding community of users, and it abstracts the land from its role in the web of urban social connections. For Lefebvre property rights alienate urban space from inhabitants, just as for Marx capital alienates from the proletariat both the means of production and the products of their own labor.

So Lefebvre sees the right to the city as a struggle to “de-alienate” urban space, to reintegrate it into the web of social connections. He talks about this de-alienation in terms of appropriation. His idea of the right to the city involves inhabitants appropriating space in the city (1996, p. 174). To appropriate something is to take it to oneself, to make it one’s own.<sup>12</sup> In claiming a right to the city, inhabitants take urban space as their own, they appropriate what is properly theirs. Property rights, for Lefebvre, are an *expropriation* of urban space. They take what properly belongs to inhabitants of a community and arrogate it to property owners, to those who bought land in the marketplace (1996, p. 129). Appropriation is thus a “right” in the sense that users have a normative right to the space of the city. It is rightfully theirs. In this light, owners’ claims to property rights are *wrong*, a claim to something that is *not* properly theirs. Appropriation is thus a way to rethink the concept of rightful ownership, to radically transform our notions about who rightfully owns the city. Not only does it refuse a property rights conception of ownership, it affirms a radical alternative: the city belongs to those who inhabit it. Appropriation is thus closely linked to both de-alienation and *autogestion*, to inhabitants making the space of the city their own again. Lefebvre evokes Jane Jacobs’s descriptions of the good street to imagine an example: “in the street, and enabled by it, a group of inhabitants can manifest itself and *appropriate* the street, they can achieve an appropriated space-time. Even one such appropriation shows that use and use value is capable of dominating exchange and exchange value” (1970, p. 30, my translation, emphasis in original)

In a way, appropriation is an act of reorientation. It reorients the city away from its role as an engine of capital accumulation and toward its role as a constitutive element in the web of cooperative social relations among urban inhabitants (2003b/1970, p. 76).<sup>13</sup> It is in this sense that Lefebvre speaks about the struggle between exchange value and use value, between the city as site of accumulation and the city as inhabited. The industrial capitalist city that we experience every day, he believes, is given over to exchange value. What he calls “the urban,” on the other hand, nurtures use value and the needs of inhabitants (1996, pp. 67–68). It is a space for encounter, connection, play, learning, difference, surprise, and novelty. The urban involves inhabitants engaging each other in meaningful interactions, interactions through which they overcome their separation, come to learn about each other, and deliberate together about the meaning and future of the city. These encounters make apparent to each inhabitant their existence in and dependence on a web of social connections. Moreover, through that growing awareness urban inhabitants come to realize that

such encounters can be enjoyable. They come increasingly to desire, cultivate, and struggle for those connections.

This image of inhabitants encountering each other and actively appropriating space points to another indispensable element of the right to the city: participation. We have seen how the new contract of citizenship involves a thoroughgoing political awakening. So too with the right to the city. Lefebvre laments that participation is often invoked in city politics but rarely practiced seriously. In his time, as in ours, participation was impoverished. Citizens rarely had more than a nominal and advisory voice in decisions. What he calls the ideology of participation “allows those in power to obtain, at a small price, the acquiescence of concerned citizens. After a show trial more or less devoid of information and social activity, citizens sink back into their tranquil passivity . . .” (1968, p. 105, my translation). Lefebvre calls instead for “real and active participation,” the pervasive activation and mobilization of inhabitants (1996, p. 145). Through this kind of participation, inhabitants experience an awakening. They come into consciousness of themselves as inhabitants, as embedded in a web of social connections, as dependent on and stewards of “the urban.” As they become conscious in this way, they recognize the need to struggle against the industrial capitalist city and for the urban. They come to see participation not as speaking at a public hearing or serving on a citizens’ panel, but as the living struggle for a city that is controlled by its inhabitants.

Lefebvre’s idea of participation among activated citizens is just one manifestation of the broader agenda of *autogestion*. In this way, the right to the city is clearly bound to the right to *autogestion*. They are not merely two adjacent rights in a menu Lefebvre is proposing. Rather, they imply each other. The right to the city is necessarily also a claim for *autogestion*, and vice versa. Participation means inhabitants increasingly coming to manage the production of urban space themselves. As they engage in real and active participation, their own collective power is revealed to them, and they increasingly understand themselves as capable stewards of the urban and its collective life. As this awakening grows and spreads, the current managers of the city, specialized professionals like state officials, corporate boards, planners, developers, architects, and so on, become increasingly redundant. This separate class of urban managers, as with the state more generally, begins to wither away. Understood in this thoroughly radicalized way, participation is also tied tightly to appropriation. As inhabitants become activated and come to manage the city themselves, they are effectively appropriating the city and the production of its space. They are taking control of the conditions of their own existence. They are making the city their own again.

This discussion helps us see the distinction between *the city* and *the urban* as Lefebvre understood it. The city does not necessarily produce, and even actively prevents, the kind of social engagement Lefebvre associates with the urban (1996, p. 103). Nevertheless, he still thinks cities are important spaces. Even if the capitalist city suppresses the urban, he thinks the city and urbanization tends, in general, away from capitalism and toward the urban. That is because large agglomerations of people multiply encounters and therefore increase the possibility of meaningful interaction. He thinks cities are, therefore, the best soil in which to cultivate the urban. They are politically important locations. That is why Lefebvre uses the term the right to the *city*, because access to and use of the space of the city is a vital element of envisioning, calling forth, and achieving a truly urban society. But still the terminology is misleading. The right to the city is not users claiming more access to and control over the existing capitalist city, a bigger slice of the existing pie. Instead it is a movement to go beyond the existing city, to cultivate the urban so that it can grow and spread.

## CONCLUSION: THE POSSIBLE URBAN

Certainly anyone who is involved in the day-to-day practice of urban politics might object to Lefebvre’s right to the city, arguing it is too radical, too impossibly utopian, to be of use. Even if that were true, I hope it is still helpful for this paper to chart the radical horizons of the right to the city so that urban scholars and practitioners are better able to contextualize and evaluate the many initiatives around the right to the city, and to understand most of them as limited by the horizon of liberal democracy.

But I think there is a better way to respond to Lefebvre's right to the city than to dismiss it as utopian. It is utopian, but that is precisely its strength. To see that strength we need to imagine utopia as Lefebvre does, differently than the way the term is commonly used. As I discuss above, Lefebvre sees "the urban" not merely as urbanization, but as a society beyond capitalism, one characterized by meaningful engagement among inhabitants embedded in a web of social connections. The urban is thus what we might call a possible world, a society yet to come. It is what Lefebvre calls an *urgent utopia*, which involves "a style of thinking turned toward the possible in all areas" (2009, p. 288). He says urgent utopias redefine socialism and communism as the "production, appropriation, and management [*gestion*] of space." This possible world or urgent utopia<sup>14</sup> lies between an ideal utopia, which exists only in purely abstract thought, and a short-term, unimaginative realism that readily assumes, and therefore accepts, existing structures (2003b/1970, p. 75). For Lefebvre both extremes are disastrous, because they hand decisions over to those already in power. Ideal utopianism remains aloof from practice because practice must always be imperfect. Unimaginative realism reinforces the existing hierarchies of power because it fails to challenge them. He says we can avoid both dangers by pursuing an urgent utopia that combines the real and the ideal, the existing and the possible. It is an approach that "steps back from the real without, however, losing sight of it" (2003b/1970, p. 7). It is a rigorous form of utopian thinking that demands constant feedback between its ideals and empirical observations (1996, p. 151). The urban as urgent utopia is a possible world that is keenly attuned to, but not limited by, present conditions.

So the urban as a possible world is in part something in the future, an imagined society that is yet to come. However, Lefebvre stresses that the urban is also something that is already here, already operating in the present city (1996, p. 148). In *The Urban Revolution* he makes clear that the idea of the urban as he presents it is extrapolated from present conditions (2003b/1970, p. 1). Every space in the city, he says, bears within it the seeds of the urban, a not-yet-realized potential for urban life (2003b/1970, p. 39). As in the Jane Jacobs scene Lefebvre evokes, there are everywhere these little eruptions of the urban, brief moments where use value, meaningful connection, play, and collective *autogestion* by inhabitants emerge and flourish. But these moments are brief and fleeting. The urban does not yet exist in its mature form; rather it is still partial, an occluded image of what it can become. It "remains in a state of dispersed and alienated actuality," he says, "the shadow of a future object in the light of the rising sun" (1996, p. 148). As a result of this inchoate quality, it is difficult for us to see urban society, even though it is developing and emerging all around us. What is worse, our senses have been so conditioned by the capitalist city that they are not attuned to perceive the urban. Therefore Lefebvre argues that the project for inhabitants, scholars, activists, and practitioners, what he calls an "urban strategy," is to recondition our senses, away from the city and toward the urban. We must learn to perceive the fledgling urban, to call it forth, and to urge society forward toward its horizon. For Lefebvre that is what utopian thinking means.

So it seems to me what Lefebvre is offering is not impractical at all. Rather it is a task that is quite practical, concrete, and achievable: seek and learn to recognize the urban that is all around us but hidden, and then nurture it in whatever way we can. It is perfectly realistic. But recognizing the urban requires a revolutionary imagination. It requires a habit of thinking in terms of urgent utopia. To see the present urban we must be willing to imagine and demand a possible world, even if that world is impossible under the conditions that exist now. For Lefebvre the urban constitutes a revolution, but one that requires millions of everyday acts of resistance and creation.

The right to the city is one vital element of this movement toward the urban. That movement is set in motion when inhabitants decide to rise up and reclaim space in the city, when they assert use value over exchange value, encounter over consumption, interaction over segregation, free activity and play over work. As they appropriate space, as they develop the ability to manage the city for themselves, they give shape to the urban. They get better at perceiving its form, at feeling its rhythms and moods. They help bring the urban out of the shadows and into the center, into the heart of the city and its social life. In innumerable tiny increments they can overcome the obstacles that stand in the way of the urban, and they can transform the impossible into the possible.

Recall that Lefebvre saw his new contract of citizenship not as an end goal, but as a political awakening, a catalyst for a movement toward *autogestion*. The right to the city is similarly a beginning, an opening, a starting out down the path toward a possible urban world. That possible world is a long way off, and it is also, at the same time, right in front of us.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 [http://www.idhc.org/cat/documents/Carta\\_ingles.pdf](http://www.idhc.org/cat/documents/Carta_ingles.pdf)
- 2 [http://www.planningnetwork.org/01\\_news/World\\_Charter\\_on\\_the\\_Right\\_to\\_the\\_City.pdf](http://www.planningnetwork.org/01_news/World_Charter_on_the_Right_to_the_City.pdf)
- 3 [http://issuu.com/cisdpdh/docs/uclg\\_global\\_charter\\_agenda\\_hr\\_city](http://issuu.com/cisdpdh/docs/uclg_global_charter_agenda_hr_city)
- 4 <http://www.righttothecity.org/index.php>
- 5 See also Harvey's own afterword to the *Production of Space* in which he says that for Lefebvre the focus on the urban was a way to go beyond merely workplace politics (Harvey, 1991, p. 430).
- 6 For Locke they give up only a *measure of their power*, for Hobbes they give it all.
- 7 This work was significantly influenced by concrete experiments with *autogestion* in Yugoslavia, among other places.
- 8 The term used in Argentina is *fábricas recuperadas*.
- 9 Experiments with *autogestion* in Buenos Aires after 2001 were a particularly good example of this sort of awakening, in which people who thought they were powerless and incapable discovered, already within themselves, a power and ability they were unaware of (see for example Notes from Nowhere and Sitrin, 2003).
- 10 He also uses the terms "industrial city" and "urban society" to express the same ideas.
- 11 Of course the contemporary rise of neoliberalism, which Lefebvre perceived even in 1967 when he was writing *The Right to the City*, intensifies the dominance of exchange value and private property.
- 12 The Latin root *proprius* means "one's own." Romance languages use this root to convey the idea of "one's own" (*proprio* in Italian and *propre* in French). Our English adjective *own* is of Germanic origin, although our words *property*, *proper*, and *appropriate* come from the Latin.
- 13 One example of this kind of reorientation is Brazil's City Statute, which is a national law, won through urban struggle and inspired by the right to the city. The law requires that in decisions about the development of land in the city, the social use value of that land be given as much consideration as its exchange value (Fernandes, 2006). In practice, the law is applied unevenly and depends greatly on the particular city government in power. Nevertheless, the idea behind the statute derives explicitly from a Lefebvrian insistence on use value. In a context in which exchange value dominates, a legal requirement that exchange and use be considered equally is a real shift. Despite this achievement, however, Lefebvre would demand even more. His idea of appropriation insists that use value become *dominant*, so that the current preeminence of exchange is not only attenuated, but inverted.
- 14 He also often uses the term "virtual object" (2003b/1970, p. 3).

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