**Right to the City: Urban Boundaries and Membership**

The right to the city, as first announced by Henri Lefebvre, is a direct challenge to the way space in urban areas is allocated, used and governed; this right also entails a re-conceptualization of citizenship. The goal of this paper is twofold: to explicate Lefebvre’s theory of citizenship and to assess whether it presents a viable alternative to our contemporary global order, in which citizenship is generally wedded to membership in a particular nation state.

The alternative notion of citizenship generated by the right to the city is inextricably bound up with the latter’s political agenda. In attempting to understand and define Henri Lefebvre’s right to the city one gets the feeling, at least initially, that she entered the realm of apophatic theology, whereby the divinity is described negatively, as what it is not. Applied to the right to the city, such *apophasis* looks like this: the right to the city is *not* a natural right, *not* a contractual right, and *not* a property right in the traditional sense (Butler 2009, 325). According to Mark Purcell, even when Lefebvre uses the term “contract,” as he does in his famous essay, *Du contrat de citoyenneté*, it is not conceived as a “formal juridical right guaranteed by the liberal-democratic state”; rather, it “aims at something more politically revolutionary” that “cannot in any sense be contained within the traditional idea of rights as legal protections…” (Purcell, 2013, 316). In Lefebvre’s own words, it is a “cry and demand” (1996, 158). Of course a “demand” is a claim made upon another party, and in this way it resembles what we normally think of as a rights claim. To capture the ambivalent nature of the right to the city, Margaret Kohn resorts to the notion of a “hetero right,” which she contends “highlights the otherness of rights that are both inside and outside the framework of liberal rights” (Kohn 2016, 88). When all is said and done, it is easy to sympathize with David Harvey when he observes that the right to the city is an “empty signifier”—everything “depends on who gets to fill it with meaning” (Harvey 2013, xv).

The endless qualifying of statements and parsing of words by Lefebvre’s interpreters, however, does not represent an instance of scholars annoyingly transforming the simple into something abstruse. Instead it is a fair warning to readers not to assume that Lefebvre’s main goal was to add another right to an existing charter of rights—though some states and organizations have tried to operationalize it in this way, *pace* Brazil’s Federal “City Statute” from 2001 and UN-HABITAT’s Rio 2010 Report. Nevertheless, the fact that the right to the city has a “hetero” quality, that it is not exactly a natural or contractual or civil right as traditionally conceived, does not mean it is devoid of substance. As we will soon discover, at a minimum, the right to the city, positively construed, is a demand of urban residents to be recognized and rendered visible by the powers that control and manage the city, and a demand to participate in decision making; formulated negatively, the right to the city is a hedge against spatial exclusion from the fruit of the collective efforts of urban inhabitants.

Lefebvre makes it clear that invoking the right to the city is not a romantic or nostalgic gesture: he does not hanker for a return of the classical Greek city-state or some other spatial incarnation of classical humanism, which, according to him, “ended long ago, and badly.” Indeed, he describes the classical project as a “mummified and embalmed corpse” (Lefebvre 1996, 149). There are many reasons, to be enumerated shortly, that Lefebvre insists the “old social animal and man of the ancient city” need to be overcome; nevertheless, despite his pointed dismissal of it, I would argue that the classical city also anticipates, albeit imperfectly, some of the key social conditions he seeks to realize. Thus, the classical city can provide a foil to illuminate some of Lefebvre’s concerns.

Aristotle famously argued that the family exists for the sake of mere biological life, that the village, wherein people work together to more efficiently supply the group’s basic needs, extends that biological life, but that the *polis* or city-state alone exists for the sake of the “good life” (Aristotle 1981). While Lefebvre would not endorse Aristotle’s teleological approach to politics, he would affirm the latter’s insight that the city—a place where people gather, collaborate and explore their differences—is the platform *par excellence* for human development and flourishing. For Aristotle, the good was defined as *eudaimonia*, well-being or happiness which, in turn, consisted of a life dedicated to acquiring and exercising the moral and intellectual virtues (Aristotle 2004). From a Lefebvrian perspective, the classical education of the passions advocated by Aristotle and others--the rigorous pruning and training via the application of the tools of pleasure and pain--was too cramped and life-denying. Whereas Aristotle exhorted polis-dwellers to seek the mean, both in the pursuit of moral virtue and in their constitutional structure, Lefebvre, channeling Nietzsche, urged his readers to “take charge of…the excesses and create something on the scale of the universe”; that is, Lefebvre replaced Aristotle’s *zoon politikon* with the modern “urban animal” for whom the city, uniquely, could supply a more Dionysian-like experience, at once “polyvalent” and “polysensorial” (Lefebvre 1996, 149). Though it is true that communal festivals featured prominently in Athenian life too, a human practice Lefebvre celebrates, insofar as ancient festivals were relegated to a strict civic calendar these ludic experiences were insufficiently woven into the rhythms of everyday life to match the Lefebvrian ideal.

Compared to modern democracies, the classical polis, at least in Athens, offered unparalleled opportunities for its citizens to participate in decision making, in shaping the community. Citizens could attend the monthly legislative assemblies, proposing and debating pieces of legislation, and important administrative posts, except for city’s military leaders (*strategoi*), were distributed in the most radically egalitarian way, through lottery. Nonetheless, citizenship was tightly controlled. Women, slaves, and metics (foreigners), whose labor and civic contributions were the indispensable prerequisite for the leisure afforded the citizen class, were excluded from community decision making. By contrast, Lefebvre advocates a “radical democratization” of cities—“an ongoing and collective struggle by urban inhabitants to manage the city for themselves…” (Purcell 2013, 311). This right to participate in decision making by *all* who dwell in the city is grounded in Lefebvre’s premise that the urban itself is a *collective* work (*oeuvre*) whose resources for self-realization—the “human as *oeuvre*”—should be available to all who inhabit urban space (1996, 149).

In sum, predicated on intense, face-to-face interaction among citizens who co-manage the city—and supported by a built environment that prioritized public spaces (such as the agora, the acropolis, the pnyx, and the theater)--the Athenian polis gestured toward but failed to redeem Lefebvre’s vision. If looking *back* at the classical city helps to bring the right to the city closer to intuition, by demonstrating how Lefebvre’s vision transcends what the ancient model could provide, then taking a sober look at the *present* conditions of contemporary urban life underline the daunting obstacles and forces against which the right to the city raises its voice.

Lefebvre describes the right to the city as a “right to urban life,” by which he means a right to the “urban,” conceived as a “place of encounter” that elevates “use value” (1996, 158). Put differently, it is the right of “appropriation,” which, according to Purcell, includes the right of inhabitants to physically access, occupy and use urban space” (Purcell 2002, 103)—to fully avail themselves of and enjoy the physical, economic, aesthetic and social dimensions of urban life. Sadly, Lefebvre contends, such an appropriation and use of urban space by the vast majority of its inhabitants is rendered impossible by the capitalist mode of production that has transformed urban spaces into sites of exchange value. In the works of Marx, the development of the forces of production in the slave and feudal modes of production, respectively, are both preserved and superseded by a capitalist mode of production, during which a quantum leap in human ingenuity was achieved. To this dialectical history of *economic* development, Lefebvre contributes an account of the corresponding changes in *spatial* frames that made capitalism possible. The distinctive form Lefebvre associates with capitalism is called “abstract space” (Lefebvre, 1992). As Chris Butler demonstrates, the dominance of the frame of “abstract space” has three “tendencies.” The first, fragmentation, breaks down space into “discrete units” which can be “privatized and traded as commodities” (Butler 209, 323). Second, though abstract space is not homogeneous (it contains a variety of objects), it is, nonetheless, marked by homogeneity insofar as it “imposes a logic of exchangeability on places and times” (323). Third, and finally, abstract space is hierarchical, ordering spaces “at the behest of economic, technological, administrative and political power” (323). In other words, we could say that abstract space is the cognitive lens through which people, who live in a world dominated by the demands of capital, “read” the city: a place where property is mostly privately or corporately owned, where goods and services are bought and sold, and a place that is itself packaged and treated as exchange value.

Intriguingly, there is an important nexus between capitalism and urbanization, a relationship laid bare by the geographer David Harvey, who explains the “dilemma” posed by the mounting surplus value or profit capitalists extract from their workers: they must decide whether to “reinvest, because if one does not reinvest then another surely will. For a capitalist to remain a capitalist, some surplus must be reinvested to make more surplus” (Harvey 2013, 5). Enter the city as savior, providing the solution to the capitalist’s “perpetual need to find profitable terrains for capital surplus production and absorption” (5). One of the tragic ironies of a capitalist mode of production, according to Marx, is the “contradiction” between the massive forces of production available to satisfy human needs and the corresponding capitalist relations of production that bottle up that potential, ensuring that it benefits one small class alone. Lefebvre expresses a similar lament, namely, that the modern city offers unparalleled economic and cultural resources but, because it prioritizes exchange over use value, urban dwellers are robbed of very city they help to build and sustain. Instead of being nourished by the city, Lefebvre argues, there is “generalized misery,” where “armies of workers with or without white collars...the colonized and semi-colonized of all sorts, all those who endure a well-organized daily life…who run to the packed underground train, the office or the factory, to return the same way in the evening and come home to recuperate enough to start the day again” (1996, 159). Far from “appropriating” the city’s life and co-directing its future, residents, argues Margaret Kohn, are mostly “dispossessed,” the dispossession taking the form of “slum clearance, gentrification, foreclosure, demolition of public housing and the privatization of public space” (Kohn 2016, 2).

If one accepts Lefebvre’s basic analysis of the limitations imposed on urban life by a capitalist mode of production and agrees with his agenda of asserting urban dwellers’ right to access, use and manage their city, what strategies should one employ—found a movement like Occupy Wall Street? Take up parkour as a form of micro-resistance to and re-appropriation of urban space? The goal of this essay is not to catalog and assess a number of different strategies, as important as that task may be; rather, it is to acknowledge and reflect upon just one profound implication of the Right to the City, namely the necessity of rethinking the meaning of and criteria for citizenship.

**Right to the City and the transformation of citizenship**

In his important essay, “From the Social Pact to the Contract of Citizenship (2003),” Lefebvre lays out some of the problems with modern, state-based citizenship, and gestures toward a new formulation. He begins by identifying an unfortunate disconnect between the eighteenth century’s proclamation of the “rights of man,” which has been broadly disseminated and embraced, and the “rights of citizens,” for which there has been less attention and enthusiasm. As he puts it: “Over two centuries the rights of men have slowly worked their way into the thinking of the age, while the rights of the citizen have been left in limbo” (2003, 248). From the standpoint of Marxist theory--if by the *rights of man* we attempt to signify the universality of human dignity and creativity and, with the *rights of the citizen*, political agency and collective determination—the two concepts should not have separate developmental trajectories, for they are intimately related. Both are grounded in the larger Marxian project of human emancipation. According to Lefebvre, one significant plot element that helps to explain their historical divergence is the rise of the nation state. An international communist movement, headed by the proletariat, the one historical class that, at least in theory, was purified or had shed its limited class concerns by surviving the crucible of capitalist exploitation, promised to redeem the philosophical hopes of the Age of enlightenment and revolution; however, universal class interests and internationalism were displaced by an “unexpected rise of the state and the nation” (247). As a consequence of a state-dominated global order, the *content* of the rights of citizenship remained “frozen” in their minimalist, eighteenth century form—i.e. the right to move freely within a territory, the right to form one’s own opinion, and the right to occasionally cast a ballot (249). And the definition citizenship was permanently shackled to the state. Lefebvre observes that however we define citizenship, whether by place of birth or residence, “it has meaning only in and through the nation or the nation state” (249).

Nevertheless, Lefebvre argues that “two realities” are shaking up the state system, namely transnational entities, such as the European Union, and migration flows across state boundaries. In other words, Lefebvre suggests that in a highly globalized environment the boundaries of the nation state are becoming, conceptually speaking, less easy to define and, practically speaking, more difficult to police. As has been well documented, the *internal* pressure on states is mounting as well, though this does not factor in Lefebvre’s analysis. The state is collapsing under the weight of the contradiction between the ever-increasing expectations of state performance on the part of domestic constituencies, on the one hand, and the decreasing capacity of state actors to manage those expectations. Beyond the diminishing power and relevance of the nation state, Lefebvre argues that a growing appreciation of people’s complex and overlapping identities demands that we re-think our conception of citizenship: “Belonging can no longer be defined by family and name (birth) or by place (residence). It has multiplied, and we all belong to our family, to a village or a town, a region, a trade or occupation, a country (homeland, nation and nationality), a state, a continent (in our case, Europe), and to one or more cultures, etc.” (2003, 249).

What specific action needs to be taken to bolster citizenship rights? Lefebvre points to the only mechanism recognized by the liberal state itself—the negotiation of a “new” *contract*. In order to have real substance, to have a juridical foundation, citizens’ rights need to be “stipulated,” that is, they must be “negotiate[d]” and then “embod[ied]” in a contract between the state and its citizens (2003, 250). There are a number of provisions that Lefebvre proposes, among them, the right to “self-management,” and the “right to the city.” He defines the first as the “knowledge of and control by a group…over the conditions governing its existence and survival through change” (252). In the modern world, those conditions are determined by a complex set of actors and forces; thus, “controlling” them will necessitate going “above” what has traditionally been considered the domain of the political and, instead, embracing a “social project” that includes the democratization of decision making about a much broader field of activities: “the domestic market, industry and food production, the fate of companies, rations with the world market and multinationals” (250). In terms of the right to the city, Lefebvre proposes grounding citizenship in “inhabiting”--of living, dwelling and participating in the life of the city--as an alternative basis for citizenship status, as an alternative to the Westphalian framework.

**The Shortcomings of Lefebvrian Citizenship**

The right to the city philosophy should be lauded for insisting that a city’s vitality depends on a legion of inhabitants who are largely excluded from the wealth the city generates, and also, then, from many of the city’s spaces and amenities. Nevertheless, though Lefebvre’s ideas are provocative, they are aspirational at best, lacking a concrete institutional design or policy framework. To bring Lefebvre’s vision into clearer focus, Mark Purcell nobly attempts to flesh out and translate these Lefebvrian ideas into what he calls the “global right to the city.” Purcell does not claim that his rendition “exhausts all possible forms a Lefebvrian citizenship might take” but is rather an “imaginative opening,” an opportunity to consider an alternative to the status quo (2003, 565). With this caveat in mind, we will critically assess Purcell’s global right to the city as a starting point for evaluating Lefebvrian citizenship.

The trajectory of this analysis will move from a discussion of the lesser to the greater obstacles to implementing this new version of citizenship. To begin, the theory’s productivist-bent appears, at least at first glance, to promote an under-inclusive form of citizenship. For instance, the language Lefebvre and Purcell use to describe the creation of urban space by urban dwellers—“earn,” “create,” “produce”—highlights the fact that the physical structures being bought and sold by real estate moguls and corporations are, literally, *built* by workers, some of whom risk their lives doing high wire acts to place the steel beams that form the skeleton of skyscrapers; that the hotels and connective tissue of city streets, the latter rolled out like so many red carpets to tourists, are cleaned and *serviced* by working women and men, most of whom cannot even afford to live in the city itself. This captures the stark reality that much of the *value* of the city is erected on the backs of and is sustained by an army of workers. If the idea of the city as *oeuvre* is construed too narrowly, however, only those people who are directly creating the exchange value of urban spaces and from whom surplus value or profit can be extracted count in some meaningful way.

But many urban dwellers are not engaged in waged labor—or not “laboring” at all. What of the aged relative being cared for by her family at home? Would she rank as a citizen in the Lefebvrian sense? What Purcell pejoratively terms the “LDW citizen model” or the current liberal-democratic-Westphalian model may tend toward abstraction, but it does have the virtue of effecting formal enfranchisement, regardless of one’s productive output. One answer to this objection is that Lefebvre has a broader understanding of “dwelling” in mind. Referencing Kofman and Lebas, Purcell notes that Lefebvre wanted to “join the urban dweller (*citadin*) and the citizen” (Cited in Purcell 2003, 577). According to Purcell, Lefebvre’s work on the everyday (*la vie quotidienne*) is the crucial “pivot” for understanding the right to the city and its attendant conception of citizenship: those who go about their daily routines in the city, both living in and creating urban space, are those who possess a legitimate right to the city (577). Thus, given Lefebvre’s extensive reflections on and theorizing of the “everyday,” it would be relatively easy to enfold the practice of caretaking, pace the question about the physically-dependent relative above, within the activity of inhabiting the city. A similar justification would be available to infants and the unemployed homeless, those whose contribution to the creation of urban space may not be immediately obvious. These people, too, have their own unique way of inhabiting by participating in everyday activities such as a stroller ride in a park, in the case of a child, and by participating in social networks, such as those that exist among a group of homeless people sharing the same strip of sidewalk and between them and housing advocates, or even the police. In short, the production of urban space includes myriad practices--the enactment of religious rituals, spontaneous play in parks and streets, the making of licit and illicit graffiti and murals and interaction among neighbors. All of these ways of inhabiting compose urban life.

If a broader concept of inhabiting is deployed, the productivist critique evaporates. More problematic, however, the Right to the City seeks to decouple urban and nation-state citizenship. As Purcell puts it: “Inhabitance *replaces* national citizenship as the basis for membership, which *unhinges* the Right to the City from the national scale, from the sovereignty of the nation-state, and from the nation as the primary political community” (Purcell 2003, 578, emphasis mine). There are at least two major ways to think about the “unhinging” of which Purcell speaks—one weak, one strong. The weak version might look like what critics and defenders alike, at least in the American context, call “sanctuary” cities. I refer to this a “weak unhinging” because it recognizes that, in our current global system, the city’s well-being rests on, is parasitic upon, a state-based security apparatus. That reality, however, does not prevent cities from sheltering individuals who have penetrated the membrane of the national border and who, from the standpoint of the state, are residing within the country illegally. In short, cities, through passive resistance, by not fully cooperating with the state’s agenda of finding and deporting undocumented aliens, treat those who inhabit their urban space as quasi citizens. In the Unites States, for instance, though Section 1373 of Chapter 8 of the US Code prevents state and local governments from adopting policies that inhibit officials from sharing “information pertaining to the immigration status, legal or illegal, of an individual” with federal authorities, local authorities have not always felt obliged to cooperate with ICE by informing it about when prisoners will be released or by detaining illegal immigrants longer than required by state-level law. This weaker version captures Lefebvre’s point about the emerging challenges to the nation state’s exclusive claim to determining citizenship status and, at least within the American context, reminds readers of the “breakwaters,” as Tocqueville called them, or sites of contestation and resistance to national dominance provided by the very structure of federalism.

The stronger version of unhinging goes much further, however. To repeat, Purcell’s global right to the city argues for the political centrality of urban space, for “inhabitance [to] *replace* national citizenship as the basis for membership” and to decouple the active dwelling in urban space from the “sovereignty of the nation-state and from the nation as the primary political community.” As it stands now, the United State’s government can decide to admit persons on a temporary or permanent basis. If a Lefebvrian notion of inhabitance were to become the norm, however, it is unclear why a person’s willingness and desire to dwell in a particular urban space would not be sufficient for them to gain entry to that city, *without* the explicit permission of the state and even if the person were moving from geographic coordinates outside the United States. If this is, indeed, Lefebvre’s intention, then his theory’s displacement of membership jurisdiction from the nation state to the city would require further justification—would need to take account of the rather formidable arguments made on behalf of national, democratic self-determination, including control over national borders (Miller 2016; Walzer 1984). In the absence of such engagement, his new model of citizenship remains “under theorized.”

Finally, and most problematic of all, Lefebvre proposes expansive powers for citizens to manage their own city. [Need L quote] Purcell argues that Lefebvre’s theory dictates that local citizens should be able to participate in *any* decision that impacts the production of urban space, at a “range of scales” (2003, 578). This premise leads Purcell to offer up the following, hypothetical scenarios: “If the government of Mexico were considering a land reform decision in Oaxaca that would influence international migration streams to Los Angeles, the right to participation would give Angeleno inhabitants a say in that decision” (581). This right to participate would, of course, “violate Mexico’s territorial sovereignty,” but that is precisely the point—to disrupt and challenge the “scalar nesting whereby a nation-state has absolute authority within its territory” (581). Or, similarly, Purcell suggests that under this new scheme of citizenship, since “the geography of employment is a key component of inhabitants’ lived space,” Angelenos would have a right to participate in any decision to move production. For example, if Chicago-based Boeing were to propose transferring the production of satellite communications equipment by Los Angeles-based Hughes Electronics to plants in Korea, Angelenos would have the right to participate in and challenge that decision (581). [admits goes both ways, ciudad Juarez and TNCs footnote 6]

Presumably, the right to global citizenship and its attendant right of self-management are open to *all* urban dwellers—to those in Los Angeles where, in Purcell’s example, the Hughes’ workers reside, *as well as to Chicagoans*, where Boeing is headquartered. While a decision to relocate production would adversely affect some Angelenos, giving them veto power could severely impact Boeing’s bottom line and, in turn, greatly diminish the tax revenue Chicagoans anticipate from Boeing, money on which they depend for school improvements. Simply put: the interests of citizens in one city are not commensurable with those of citizens in another, at least not on every occasion. The situation becomes even more unwieldy when (Seoul) South Korea and Oaxaca, Mexico are thrown in the mix. It is not merely that Purcell’s treatment implausibly adds “participation” in (interference in) decisions by sovereign nations outside the U.S. (pace the land reform hypothetical involving Mexico) to his self-management scheme; the more vexing problem is that the number of actors “influencing” an urban space like Los Angeles, absent some very clear, limiting criteria, is nearly infinite. Should Angelenos have a say in land reform deals in *any* country from whence an immigrant hails or only in those places from which a certain threshold percentage of Angelenos originate? Should they have a voice in the decision making of every small business in Los Angeles or only those with a certain number of workers or that account for a certain percentage of city’s economic output? Unless principled, satisfactory answers can be given to these queries, the theory is wholly unworkable.

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