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## Right to the City versus Spatial Justice?

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Interview with Amandine Spire and Marianne Morange, coordinators of the DALVAA research programme, conducted by Muriel Froment-Meurice and Claire Hancock - Paris, May 2018

**CH:** Hi. Our journal JSSJ is celebrating its first ten years and we wanted to hold discussions with groups we identify as having things to say about spatial justice, to exchange ideas and thoughts. You are both part of the DALVAA group<sup>1</sup>, though Marianne is a member both of DALVAA and JSSJ, has been since the journal's origins. What about you Amandine?

**Amandine:** I took part in the discussions which occurred between 2006 and 2009 when the journal was created. I didn't participate in the 2008 spatial justice conference because I was doing fieldwork in West Africa, for my doctoral research. I was familiar with the notion of spatial justice because I was part of the GECKO research group of the University of Nanterre, with which I was doing my PhD, and as a member of the ANR-funded JUGURTA research programme which began more or less at the same time<sup>2</sup>.

**Marianne:** I was also a member of GECKO, though in a secondary capacity, since I was lecturing at university Paris-13. I took part in JUGURTA too and that's how Amandine and I met.

**Amandine:** It was a very large project, with about thirty researchers, of which several were PhD students being supervised by Philippe Gervais-Lambony.

**CH:** When you started the DALVAA project [in 2013], you chose the right to the city as your framework. Why?

**Amandine:** Well, it had to do with an institutional context.

**Marianne:** Yes, institutional affiliations matter: JUGURTA ended in 2012. At that point, I had taken up a job at university Paris-7, at the SEDET.

**Amandine:** As for me, I finished my PhD in 2009 and got a job in 2011 also at Paris-7 where I joined Marianne.

**Marianne:** It was a transitional period, I think, for both of us.

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1. "Rethinking the Right to the city from the South – Africa, Latin America", a research programme funded by Ville de Paris and based at the CESSMA (2014-2018).

2. The JUGURTA project (on spatial justice) ran from 2008 to 2012.

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**Amandine:** We carried on our collaboration by organizing a seminar session on spatial justice, in 2011, at the SEDET. This then turned into a reading seminar on the right to the city, as colleagues joined us with the transformation of SEDET into CESSMA (with the arrival of colleagues from the Institut de Recherche sur le Développement, in particular). Other members of the JUGURTA projects, from the LAVUE research group, also came to the seminar.

**Marianne:** So we had both just arrived at the university Paris 7, we were both in the City sub-group of our research group, and we wanted to start something. Hence this seminar, constructed around the idea of right to the city, and not of spatial justice. The DALVAA programme derived from there.

**Amandine:** Right to the city, from the South<sup>3</sup>.

**CH:** Which authors were you reading?

**Amandine:** First we read Lefebvre and Anglophone neo-marxist radical geographers who have been using his work since the early 2000s. Harvey, of course, Lefebvre, Brenner, Marcuse, Samara, Purcell, Huchzermeyer among others, and some sociology, work by Walter Nicholls, Justus Uitermark or Julie-Anne Boudreau.

**Marianne:** We didn't want to focus on a particular school, we read in very varied directions, including the UN's appropriations of the right to the city, along with some researchers from our group (M.-H. Zérah and V. Dupont), and others more critical (B. Kuymulu). We were trying to understand how the notion had been re-interpreted and see what could be done with it in the South and in the present time. So to return to the initial question: why not work with the framework of spatial justice? Why prefer the right to the city? The answer has to do with this institutional context. The right to the city was easier to discuss with our colleagues of the City sub-group, more than spatial justice. Another aspect that I don't think I had thought through at the time, was the fact that the right to the city, while strongly critical, is in a way less prescriptive than the notion of spatial justice.

**Amandine:** Yes, we were thinking about social and spatial normativity, the production of norms of urban lives by public policies, and the idea of right to the city allowed for that, by using the notion of « rights », when it would have been more difficult with spatial justice.

**Marianne:** We were also striving to form a research collective within the CESSMA. But debates about spatial justice, from the point of view of other researchers in the CESSMA, were strongly identified with Nanterre, with the *JSSJ* journal, for some, or a clearly defined group. The notion of « right to the city » had all the advantages of spatial justice while being more broadly appropriated: it meant something for people working in development as well as for researchers with critical perspectives, with very different objects and working in different places. So it federated more widely. We did not give up on the idea of spatial justice. But it just didn't work for what we were trying to build back then.

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3. The CESSMA is a research group specialized in the study of areas of the Global South.

**CH:** And in your field research, say, in South Africa, Ghana or Togo, is the notion of right to the city used? Does it mean things to people, or is it perceived as a theoretical discourse from the North, or from international organizations?

**Marianne:** Well, our answers are likely to be different, because the countries in which we work are. In our research programme we constantly discussed this, questioning the relevance of the notion out in the field, the meaning it took on there or the ways it did not resonate. South Africa, where I do my research, is close to Anglophone academia, because of researchers' mobilities, literatures of reference. Even if South African researchers understandably focus on the issues of post-apartheid, those are their references. They share them with Anglo-America, partly, so the right to the city is discussed in academic work. Social movements also use it. But it is not part of policy-making. So from a South-African perspective, it would have been possible to integrate that sort of debate. But it didn't really work in the other contexts.

**Amandine:** It didn't work at all. In Togo and Ghana, where I work, the right to the city is not a category. In Togo, social movements don't use the idea, and as far as I know there is no theoretical discussion of it in French there. In Ghana, some actors use the phrase right to the city in its UN-inspired sense. We wanted to contrast these contexts, and work in some in which the category had no social or political currency. Our objective wasn't to produce a sociology of social movements claiming rights to the city, or to look at local political appropriations of the notion or its integration in policy-making. Neither did we want to apply it in a normative or prescriptive way. We wanted to use the right to the city as an analytical category to think about the effect of the production of norms and ordering, in relation with forms of recognition or the granting of rights. It can be problematic when there is a social struggle, on the ground, that mobilizes the idea of right to the city (for example in Mexico City and in Brazil where several members of our group did their field work), it can cause misunderstandings of our use of the notion. On the other hand, in authoritarian contexts in which the notion is unspoken, such as Maputo, Addis Abeba or Lomé, we were the ones spreading the idea of right to the city in academic settings, which also raises questions. We had endless discussions about that, and I don't see them ending.

**CH:** So in your final conference the notion was completely taken apart?

**Marianne:** In a way, yes, because the conference had a different critical objective. That was our programme's aim. When the conference took place (in November 2017), we had colleagues come over to discuss our point of view. The call for papers (<https://dalvaa.hypotheses.org/colloque-2017>) had been written collectively, with all group members. We wanted to explain how we had used the notion, and see if that resonated with others' views. As if always the case with conference, the call was taken heed of differently. We had some very classical appropriations of the notion in some papers, and others were closer to our own emphasis on norms and practices, in relation with public policy. It was interesting because both spoke to each other.

**Amandine:** What we really wanted was to articulate the notion of right to the city with urban practices, the experience and condition of city-dwellers. That was the angle that we put forward in the call, while remaining open to other ways of reading these issues of public policy, city life,

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*citadinité* and right to the city together. We also wanted to hear what colleagues had to say about the right to the city in the Global South today, with different perspectives, and we respected that diversity.

**Marianne:** We didn't want to abide by a dogmatic or prescriptive reading of the right to the city, we meant to connect it with the processes whereby citizens, ordinary citizens so to speak, not politically engaged, gain a certain number of rights, in a very general sense, for instance through regularization processes.

**Amandine:** social, economic rights...

**Marianne:** yes, we wanted to look at how that transforms their relation to the state, how they are politically affected, as subjects of urban government.

**Amandine:** The Global South is particularly stimulating to think about these processes. They are not specific and could be observed in the North. But there is greater informality and more citizens find themselves in irregular conditions, the aspiration to recognition by the state is very strong.

**Marianne:** In the literature on the Global South you find a lot about the denial of rights, evictions, violence to city-dwellers... in particular when the right to the city is being discussed. We wanted to displace the focus to moments and spaces of regularization, formalization, processes of « integration », while preserving a critical perspective, of course, and to question their political meaning through the notion of right to the city.

**CH:** Which you could also look at through the theories of justice as recognition, as redistribution and parity of participation.

**Marianne:** We did indeed run into that idea of recognition. It's not something central but it's partly what we've come to. Theories of recognition such as Axel Honneth's, in a Marxist perspective, are related to the experience of injustice and contempt, misrecognition. We were looking at the reverse: moments of recognition which Honneth would probably consider as « fake » recognition and « social pathologies », since these forms of recognition do not really entail a real emancipation as political subject. But in the social sciences I find it tricky to analyze normatively this gap between emancipatory promise and lack of self-realization because the quest for recognition, in the sense of inclusion within capitalism, is expressed forcefully by citizens. We debated this question constantly. In DALVAA, we tried to reflect on how legal recognition, regularization, formalization, can be simultaneously a process of subjection and a process of emancipation. We spent a lot of time discussing that ambivalence.

**Amandine:** That's why we paid attention to the everyday, routine actions. Social and spatial micro-arrangements, forms of control, of constraint, of the self, of others, and so on. We wanted to show it's difficult to sort out between what alienates and what can be a form of emancipation.

**Marianne:** That's how we reinterpreted the right to the city. And it leads us to a discussion of the normative foundations of critical thought in urban studies.

**Amandine:** There's a choice to be made between the detailed analysis of social realities and readings in political philosophy.

**CH:** With the people you encountered in the field, either researchers or activists, did the categories of just and unjust open up conversations ?

**Marianne:** In South Africa that was rather easy, I would say. The idea of justice is often referred to there, whether the actual word is used or not. My current research is about street vending, which isn't thought about in terms of justice and isn't part of the debate about the right to the city, as it exists in South Africa, where it has to do with squatting and land property, urban services. So in that area, there are political issues around good governance and post-apartheid social justice, but I did not enter those debates. I worked on political effects of regularization policies in Cape Town, on the effects these policies had on the political subjectivities of regularized vendors. I didn't use the notion of justice for that.

**Amandine:** In Togo, the notion of spatial justice is tough to use. It's a political context in which power is exerted in authoritarian ways. Within DALVAA, I looked at processes of eviction, paying attention to « soft » constraints, relocation operations. These procedures of re-ordering are dictating by international norms and sponsors and allow for a small degree of democratic progress, even if it is minor. What is at stake for the authorities and for local government, in Lomé, is the acceptance of operations that could be seen as unfair to some undesirable groups, some minorities, and some precarious city-dwellers. Through the re-orderings, these citizens nonetheless gain some rights, some compensations (with the surrounding context of the creation of a more formal land market), even if they are very limited. A lot of the literature on evictions focuses on this question: is there a fair compensation? I look at it in a less normative way. I try and understand the effects of this policy. This is what I started looking at within the JUGURTA programme, and I coordinated a collective chapter on evictions and spatial justice in the edited volume *La justice spatiale et la ville*. The idea was to go and see what happened afterwards, once people have been forced to leave their living environment or their economic activity. How do they rebuild? Question how people subscribe to certain norms and certain orders, be they social, political or economic. What sticks? What resists? What re-aligns? How are new hierarchies organized? These are issues I already looked at in my PhD thesis, indirectly. I studied the presence of foreigners in the city, in particular in an area called the Zongo, where there were several evictions in the story of the city of Lomé. I studied memories to understand what, thirty years later, remained of this history of uprooting, and how new roots were created. But using the term of justice is difficult in the political context of Togo, because of its normative content.

**CH:** Which brings us to another question, of how you handle having on the one hand, to work as objective researchers, maintaining a standard of scientific objectivity, and on the other hand, the fact that one may personally be an activist, and hold strong personal opinions about issues. How do you deal with this tension in your fieldwork and respective research?

**Amandine:** In the countries where I work, engagement seems completely impossible. My choice has been to say: I can engage here in Paris, on the issue of irregularity, undocumented migrants, which raises political questions to do with city-dwellers' relation to the state, irregularity in the

city, and the effects and limits of political recognition for people who are denied rights. From the point in which regularization occurs, what does it mean to have official documents? What are the procedures? Working with an activist association, I am not constructing research objects, but creating social relations, in a place people enter as volunteers, each with their own experience, baggage, age, etc., to try and interact with people who are being denied rights of abode and that we live close to on an everyday basis.

**Marianne:** Personally, I am not an activist. I don't think that I could navigate that. Maybe I engage differently, in my professional practice, in my political life and union activity. As far as I'm concerned, engagement is not part of scientific practice.

**CH:** What are the ways in which domination could be challenged by scholarly work, do you subscribe to the idea that countries of the Global South are not just there to provide empirical fodder, field experience, but also produce new theories, the famed *Southern Theory*?

**Marianne:** People who theorize the *Southern Turn* do so from relatively comfortable institutional positions and it's hard to see in what ways they are dominated. Which doesn't make their work any less relevant, or mean we don't need to de-center our analyses. But I don't think they are countering domination by what they do. Most of them work in the Global North, in the UK, US, or Canada. The debate is complex but it did not have that much influence over what we were doing in DALVAA. We did not want to take part in the debates on the *Southern turn* because we did not want to reify and naturalize the category of « South ».

**Amandine:** That was the position we were trying to stick to in the programme, not to reify and naturalize the category of South, but to think from cities of the South that are indeed not dominant within urban studies. Cities of the South are often read, in terms of their social, political and economic dynamics, through theories elaborated in the North and about cities of the North. But we cannot say that we were trying to subvert things in the way the *Southern turn* claims to.

**CH:** And in retrospect, what did the comparison between Africa and Latin America give? Was the dialogue fruitful?

**Amandine:** We paid attention to issues of political and economic chronology, to the diversity of contexts and political systems. We approached things in terms of political regimes, democratic or authoritarian, which are crucial to think about the political effects of re-orderings and experiences of regularization.

**MFM:** How did the idea of right to the city affect your methods or ways of doing fieldwork?

**Marianne:** The way we used it meant we primarily conducted qualitative research. Methodologically, it was a challenge: how do you study the question of the relation to norms and political subjectivities, methodologically? We weren't necessarily innovative but we developed ethnographic sensitivities.

**CH:** What you were talking about earlier, an attention to banal, ordinary situations?

**Marianne:** Yes, with variations. Personally, I had worked mostly with semi-directive interviews, biographic narratives, for instance in my PhD, to document life courses. The DALVAA project was about subjectivity, governmentality, which called for a more comprehensive approach. I used non participant direct observation, which I hadn't practiced so much previously, at least not in that way. I also went for freer interviews.

**Amandine:** I had already worked in that way for my PhD. Because I was looking at the figure of the foreigner in the city, so, practices and representations, and used semi-directive interviews, but also freer ones and a lot of observations in some places of the city : bus stations, mosques, public spaces, etc.

**Marianne:** And we collectively worked on those methodologies.

**CH:** Many of your initial readings were in English, so how did it go when you started writing, did you write in French quoting Anglos or did you think : well, maybe we have a contribution to make to the Anglo debate about this? Or debates in Spanish, since some of the work was taking place in Latin America?

**Marianne:** This is a point that we discussed a lot, in particular when preparing the final conference. We had four working languages: Portuguese, Spanish, French, English, because of the various countries we worked in.

**Amandine:** And we were lucky enough to have a post-doc, Franscesca Pilo', who spoke all four languages.

**Marianne:** She was key. She helped us develop our project of a conference that was very inclusive in terms of languages: everything was written in the four languages and everyone pitched in.

**Amandine:** So some participants spoke Spanish, Portuguese, English...

**Marianne:** But, when it comes to the dissemination of our own research results, we first went for a Francophone readership with an issue of the journal *Métropoles*, published in 2017, an issue of the *Annales de géographie* coordinated by Sophie Didier and Pascale Philifert (who are also members of the committee of *Justice Spatiale*), and an issue of *Problèmes d'Amérique Latine*, coordinated by Aurélie Quentin (managing editor of *Justice Spatiale*) and Aurélia Michel. Our contribution to the Anglophone debate on the right to the city, with a Southern perspective, is more complex and ongoing.

**Marianne:** In fact, one of the problems is that the way we used the notion did not allow for an easy discussion with Anglophone authors. Our approach is difficult to argue for because it doesn't fit in the debates as shaped by them, which fosters misunderstandings.

**Amandine:** There's this idea that the right to the city has to be subversive. For some people, the right to the city necessarily implies a revolutionary process and an overturning of the political order.

**Marianne:** It seems very difficult, in this frame of reference, to use « right to the city » in a perspective other than Lefebvrian or neo-marxist. If you do, you are a liberal defending the promotion of urban rights in the city. The notion of spatial justice, in this respect, is less of a minefield than right to the city, which has been appropriated in legalistic and reformist ways.

**CH:** And if you argued « on the ground, that perspective means nothing to people », wouldn't that be heard ?

**Amandine:** That may be what caused us to talk primarily to a French academic context.

**Marianne:** We argued along those lines: in countries of the South, there are processes of recognition of rights, and it's important to take them seriously. That worked because it resonated with a contemporary discussion in urban studies, about the Southern Turn, even if, as we said, that was not our approach. Some authors argue, from the Southern perspective, for instance Marie Huchzermeyer, that Henri Lefebvre himself, as part of his project for revolutionary emancipation, pays attention and is open to issues of positive rights. Which allowed us to contribute to the discussion on Lefebvre's relation to positive rights.

**MFM:** Your papers talk of « *de facto* right to the city », I was wondering whether it was a way of neutralizing the right to the city full stop ?

**Marianne:** Yes, it was a way of distancing ourselves from Lefebvre's work. But the phrase does not refer to a number of social practices that could « *de facto* » compensate the lack of revolutionally alternative, that would be a conservative understanding of it.

**Amandine:** What we were trying to understand are the processes that grant the right to be a city-dweller...

**Marianne:** ... and we would like to continue looking at political subjectification, as it relates with city-life experience and processes of recognition, maybe without the notion of right to the city, and thinking more in terms of justice or of norms. We're not sure yet.

**Pour citer cet article :** Muriel FROMENT-MEURICE et Claire HANCOCK, "Right to the City Versus Spatial Justice", [« Droit à la ville versus justice spatiale? », translation: Claire Hancock], *Justice spatiale | Spatial Justice*, n° 12, October 2018 (<http://www.jssj.org>).