

## Neoliberalization and Evolution of the “Right to the City”

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### Abstract

For over two decades, various urban social movements have been growing in a number of cities around the world. Denouncing the effects of the neoliberal hold on the city, they aim to combat exclusion and to rethink the city. In the face of the growing urban inequalities, some have federated around the demand to a “right to the city”. By tracing the history of the international spread of the idea of the right to the city, this article intends to show how its applications have been more or less reworked according to local context. It emphasizes that the related narratives and concepts are endlessly readjusted to the worsening of the urban context by integrating very diverse ambitions to the point of deviating from the initial content, aiming for a profound transformation of society, towards an ethic of the city. But this strong resurgence of the “right to the city” also conveys an awareness of the acceleration and generalization of the injustices in the city resulting from neoliberalism. The components are based on the findings of research carried out around the work of Henri Lefebvre and an analysis of documents derived from national and international reports.

*Key words: Urban globalization - Right to the city - Neoliberalism - Spatial fragmentation - Exclusions.*

In 1968, Henri Lefebvre published a work in France entitled *Le Droit à la ville* [tr.: The right to the city] (Lefebvre, 1968). This work was in the tradition of functionalist urbanism, the end of the industrial city, its break-up into suburbs and peripheries. It announced the emergence of a new reality: the *urban* reality. The author hoped to see a new civilization emerge from this urban society in training that “[tr.] would control to the point of eliminating the split between the elite and the people, in other words, the dual or triple society” (Lefebvre, 1996) within which citizens, “[tr.] civility, urbanity” might be completely fulfilled. Implementation of the right to the city was to be one of the main means for this.

Four decades later, this extension of the urban has proven true to such an extent that in the early 21st century, “urban globalization” has been achieved (Stébé, Marchal, 2010). But contrary to Henri Lefebvre’s hopes, this urban society has not gone in the anticipated direction. Moreover, he intuited that the worst could still be to come. “[tr.] Would the urban make its mark as the new barbarity?” (Lefebvre, 1996).

Urban globalization has in fact been accompanied by a stream of spatial barriers. It seems that today the socio-spatial gaps have become emphasized to the point of creating seclusion processes that occur at all levels of society and which, in some

cases, seem close to the creation of “micro-States”. Geographer David Harvey thus accuses the “neoliberal turn” of having “given the rich elites the power of their class” (Harvey, 2010), while the repercussion has been “[tr.] the incomes of the poor have either stagnated or gone down” (Harvey, 2010). This situation is inevitably projected onto “[tr.] the spatial forms of our cities” which turn into “[tr.] aggregates of fortified fragments” (Harvey, 2010) that are increasingly homogeneous and sealed off. The preferred enclosures of the elites are superimposed on public spaces protected with greater surveillance; these are the central or peri-central neighbourhoods that attract the middle categories, residential neighbourhoods that stand out in comparison to their poorer neighbours. There are as many rejections of otherness, fleeing from the diversity so encouraged by privately supported urban governance that is supported and financially-guided policies and competitiveness conveying the advent of the “neoliberal city” (Rousseau, 2012).

In the face of this amplification of the inequalities, the ideals of urban citizenship and belonging seem so shaken that “[tr.] the mere idea that the city might function as a collective political body, as a place in which and from which progressive social movements might emanate, would seem to lose all plausibility” (Harvey, 2009). In recent years, more or less having to do with Henri Lefebvre, various urban social movements have formed under the right-to-the-city banner with the main objective, at first, of resistance to the harmful effects of the neoliberal system. An approach that was more a political, legal or cultural tool than superimposed itself on this global perspective of right to the city.

Through the lineage of the international dissemination of the concept of the right to the city arising from collective and public action, our remarks aim to show how the implementations of this right have been reworked to a greater or lesser degree depending on the local context, and how the content of the narratives related thereto are endlessly readjusted to the deteriorations of the urban context, integrating very different ambitions to the point of moving away from its initial content (a profound transformation of society) towards an ethic of the city.

### **1. Countering neoliberalism with the “right to the city”**

Since 1999, a certain number of international protest demonstrations have begun in reaction to neoliberal restructuring and the accompanying gradual removal of citizens’ rights. Opponents of globalization organized to impede certain international summit meetings<sup>1</sup>. In this context, the gradual rise of a right to the city would be

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<sup>1</sup> The first riot that brought together militants from the entire world to impede the World Trade Organization summit was in Seattle (Anti-WTO demonstration: *Rainforest Action Network*) to condemn the effects of trade’s domination, the IMF, the World Bank, and the world capitalist economy, which were identified as those primarily responsible for this deterioration of living conditions of the

brought by civil society, under the influence of Anglo-Saxon researchers on urban studies, and more specifically, the work of geographers greatly inspired by Henri Lefebvre's theories. Notably, Edward Soja and David Harvey participated in making the connection between politics, the economy of restructuring and urban governance, a connection which in the ongoing budding anti-globalism movements, was very quickly established between the change of urban governance and the increasingly obvious deprivation of certain urban rights of the poorest populations, which are kept out of decision-making and denied the services that shape the city (Purcell, 2002). Thus, the habitat problems which the *Habitat International Coalition* (HIC) – an assembly of international non-government organizations - first focussed on, but also the problems of living conditions in the urban setting were increasingly addressed as being directly related to the domination exerted by the market and States. Added to this is the awareness of the constant worldwide growth of the urban population, which finds itself in a multi-faceted crisis situation. The debates grew and drew attention to the negative fall-out of this social process for a large percentage of the inhabitants who will find it increasingly difficult to meet their basic needs.

Since then, the World Social Forum (WSF) was formed at the initiative of civil society organizations and social movements of newly industrialized countries. The WSF describes itself as first and foremost a space for debate (and not as a social movement), and a space for discussion and meetings that can help lead to initiatives and social movements. The first meeting was in 2001 at Porto Alegre and brought together citizen organizations close to the alter-globalization cause and led by the desire for "another possible world". In this desire for a world with greater solidarity and to conceive of an economy with human economic goals, the WSF included city living conditions which are in fact marked by an overall deterioration and inequalities that are more obvious than ever. A large portion of the urban population finds itself condemned to "[tr.] precarious living conditions and threatened by natural disasters<sup>2</sup>". In addition to the environmental degradation, excessive privatization, the reduction of public spaces... are more elements that exacerbate segregation and exclusion. Universal access to the conditions for well-being that the city is supposed to bring, tends to the contrary, to be missing and only benefit a small portion of the privileged. This observation and challenge are what caused the first World Social Forum to offer to create a model for society that provided "[tr.] the equitable use of cities based on the principles of viability and social justice<sup>3</sup>". The action consisted of mobilizing the peoples' movements, non-government organizations, professional

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entire planet. This movement expanded very quickly to Washington, Montreal, Göteborg, Genoa, Porto-Alegre, etc.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.base.china-europa-forum.net> (World Charter for the Right to the City)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.endatiersmonde.org/docs/Droit\\_la\\_ville.pdf](http://www.endatiersmonde.org/docs/Droit_la_ville.pdf)

associations, and civil society networks around this collective project of city dwellers, “[tr.] based on their values and customs and granting their action and organization legitimacy in their goal of fully exercising the right to a suitable model for living<sup>4</sup>” with the right to the city making it possible to federate the actions.

Thus the first draft of a world charter to the right to the city took shape as a set of devices and measures so that “[tr.] all individuals live in a dignified manner in our cities<sup>5</sup>”. The Right to the City” as it was then referred to, took the shape of a set of pledges or demands based primarily on moral principles: “protection”, “respect”, “protection of civil and human rights”, the concrete implementation of which was poorly described. So, the right to the city was formed as a platform for promoting this “new human right”, without actually describing its implementation, its execution or the regulatory procedures of that which is only part of one aspect of moral recognition. Implementation for countering the underlying problem, i.e. the excess of neoliberalism and the actors that are mainly responsible for it, was only touched upon. It limited itself to producing a collective will without being as radical as Henri Lefebvre, who called upon the dispossessed to revolt. However, one of the WSF’s objectives was to have this right recognized as a Human Right. Following its first forum, which now meets once a year in a number of cities around the world, various social movements will take up the torch and commit in turn to this social struggle.

Brazil very quickly added the Right to the City to its constitution approved by federal law no. 10-257 of July 10, 2001, entitled the “City Statute”. Columbia followed soon thereafter. Similarly, at the same time a number of mayors of European cities adopted the European Charter of Human Rights in the City. Among its commitments, this charter made the Right to the City a provision of this charter, i.e. that the residents find in the city as “a collective space...the conditions for their political, economic and environmental flourishing”; for their part, the municipal authorities committed to ensuring “respect for the dignity of all and quality of life of the inhabitants<sup>6</sup>”.

In 2003, the *Association Internationale des Techniciens, Experts et Chercheurs* (AITEC), clearly affirmed it. It aimed to form a network of citizens engaged in a social movement: “The right to the city cannot solely take the form of a right not to be excluded from the city....The right to the city is having the benefit of suitable housing, paying work, settling one’s family, living safe from police harassment..., to live in a beautiful, comfortable, healthy, city that is respectful of the environment<sup>7</sup>”. A political issue is added to that: the right for city-dwellers, then perceived as “users of the city” (Tribillon 2003) to participate in decisions related to development and town planning

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.endatiersmonde.org/docs/Droit\\_la\\_ville.pdf](http://www.endatiersmonde.org/docs/Droit_la_ville.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.endatiersmonde.org/docs/Droit\\_la\\_ville.pdf](http://www.endatiersmonde.org/docs/Droit_la_ville.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> The European Charter for the Safeguarding of Human Rights in the City. [www.aidh.org](http://www.aidh.org)

<sup>7</sup> [www.aitec.reseau.ipam.org](http://www.aitec.reseau.ipam.org)

and to be able to protest “public decisions that could be described as acts of poor urban management<sup>8</sup>”, to regain “the attributes of citizenship”. This set of proposals could foster the emergence of a “global citizens civil movement<sup>9</sup>”. The demands underlying this right thus mix the living conditions in the city and interventions on the cities, associating the right to the city with rights in the city.

In the years that followed, other world urban forums continued to organize around the same themes. As part of the 2004 forum, various social movements joined by organizations from around the world confirmed, with the support of the UNO, UNESCO and UN-Habitat, the “World Charter of the Right to the City” which is a three-fold instrument expressing demands and urban struggles: the full exercise of citizenship; democratic governance of the city; and, the social function of ownership and the city. Its purpose is to enable city-dwellers to exercise their rights, in urban areas in particular, in order to protect them against “[tr.] development that excludes certain fringes of society” but also “against the unfair distribution of the benefits and the endemic marginalization in cities today” (UN-Habitat, 2011).

Many countries signed: after Brazil, Ecuador, Australia, South Africa, Peru and other countries of Latin America also put forward “[tr.] the concept of right to the city in various economic, political and cultural spheres” (Un-Habitat, 2011), the direct relationship to Henri Lefebvre referred to more or less, depending on the case.

In 2009, a community of experts from 34 countries<sup>10</sup> met to once again explore this concept and come up with a “human rights agenda”, which created a collective right where citizens are active agents of change. It refers to two main sources: Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey. Four aspects are primarily raised<sup>11</sup>. First of all, the Right to the City is associated with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, presented as an ethical value which must from now on be included with all human rights: “*The right to the city is a group of ethical values that all urban dwellers have to adhere to in order to promote new content for an urban social contract*”. It is considered first and foremost a collective right rather than a collection of specific rights and it can only be effective if citizens are seen as *active agents of change* able to influence decisions on the city’s development, use of public space and the private property regime. Next, the re-evaluation of human rights became necessary in the face of the growing urbanization of poverty and institutional discrimination with regard to minorities. With the cities transforming into arenas of conflict, the right to the city must therefore make it possible to guarantee the freedom to live there without the pain of poverty, in affordable housing, and the right to enough to eat... It

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.aitec.reseau-ipam.org> “Droit au logement, droit à la ville”

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.aitec.reseau-ipam.org> “Droit au logement, droit à la ville”

<sup>10</sup> Under the auspices of UN-Habitat, UNESCO

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.unhabitat.org>

is also established as a means for combating poverty and exclusion<sup>12</sup>. The right to the city, then perceived as an indispensable platform for contesting this “urban marketing”, encouraged UN-Habitat and UNESCO to set the objective of strengthening it through legislation, envisioning a legal reform applicable to everyone.

HIC for its part, in *Cities for all* (Sugranyes, Mathivet, 2010), relays all the experiences in the world that could contribute to the theoretical and practical framework of the right to the city, with the objective of making it “[tr.] a source of inspiration for people to succeed in living in peace and dignity in each city” (Sugranyes, Mathivet, 2010). These experiences of struggle around this right are united toward a same goal: “*That another city is possible*”. In 2011, UNESCO again participated in collaboration with the *Centre des Sciences Humaines* [Centre for Human Sciences] in Delhi in preparing a report entitled *Urban policies and the right to the city in India* (UNESCO, 2011) in which the right to the city is presented as a powerful tool for dealing with the social transformation of an ever-growing urban population that should reach 875 million in 2050. This right is intended to provide professionals and city planners with a certain number of legal and town planning requirements that could work to foster religious tolerance and strengthen the participation of the poorest in urban management.

Finally, the UN-Habitat report, published in 2011 (UN-Habitat, 2011) on the state of the world’s cities, affirms the objective of reducing the urban divide in an “effort of democratic integration”, a “force for social change”, while Enda (Enda Tiers-Monde), in collaboration with HIC, encourages inhabitants from the south to mobilize around it: “[tr.] Civil society organizations and residents movements provide in a context of right to the city, a challenge to build a sustainable model of society and urban life, based on the principles of solidarity, freedom, equality, dignity and social justice. One of these foundations must be the respect of the various urban cultures and a balance between the urban and rural<sup>13</sup>”.

## 2. Towards an ethic of the city?

When all is said and done, the demand for a right to the city has taken on considerable magnitude in the last 25 years. This willingness to rethink the cities in different ways in different places in the world is concurrent with the degradation of the urban setting, the acceleration of forms of privatization not to say, exclusion of

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<sup>12</sup> “*The right to the city is a fundamental human right [...] premised on the recognition that there is a close nexus between economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing [...] Urbanization comes with a lot of challenges such as poverty, social exclusion, environmental degradation, transport nightmares, crumbling infrastructure, poor housing coupled with sprouting of informal settlements, and incessant conflicts*”. <http://www.unhabitat.org>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.endatiersmonde.org>

the poorest segments of the population, with a broken up society being a fact, and, to counter it, awareness, along the lines of Henri Lefebvre, of space as a "revolutionary mobilization tool" (Clerval, 2012) because it is produced by capitalism and class relations. In this context, the right to the city finds all its resonance as a guide to a "better possible" and the echo of Henri Lefebvre's philosophy takes on a new dimension: "[tr.] Either the *urban* will be a space where society and the social break up...or it will be a place of reappropriation of everyday life, of the social. If there is not absolute determinism...a more or less conscious choice is made. Today's and tomorrow's *urban* is a bundle of possibilities, the best and the worst" (Lefebvre, 1996).

The fact remains that if experiences are increasing a bit everywhere in the world, they are expressed very differently, based on local context, a sort of bric-a-brac having in common their unanimous reference to this right, to the point that it becomes even more of a slogan rather than achieving a specific right. Furthermore, it appears that the various charters and manifestos finally cover a fairly broad area: the right to housing, an ecologically sustainable environment, security, education, well-being, participation in urban policies, etc. However, this is not a set of separate rights but the demand for a common right, a right that encompasses and encourages gathering, unifying struggles for a collective goal: achieving a city that meet the needs of most people, regardless of their social position.

Based on that, two trends stand out. The more radical is a hybrid of Lefebvre's approach and that of his followers, most of which are geographers, and to which a few militant organizations with greater or lesser ties to the World Social Forum, have attached themselves. In a deeply committed struggle against neoliberal globalization economic logic, this approach calls for a "bottom-up mobilization", a unified social movement to make its realization possible, as inherent to civil and human rights, and as an integral part of human rights. First and foremost, it is completely focussed on the implementation of resistance on the part of inhabitants through autonomous practices opposed to this ascendancy of capital-driven planning, while also endeavouring to bring out the potentialities already contained in the urban. The approach aimed at is the implementation of a movement to counter where neoliberalism has gone off-course and its consequences on the 21st century city, particularly on the poorest populations, which are increasingly marginalized. It is based on criticism of the production of modern capitalist space which has spread to the entire planet, with the objective of achieving greater control over the financial interests that dominate the urban: "[tr.] These days, there must be a global struggle mainly directed against financial capital, as from now on this is where the town planning processes take place" (Harvey, 2011). Most social movements have taken this stand and consider the production of urban space the result of daily struggles

requiring everyone's mobilization. As previously seen, AITEC, the *International Alliance of Inhabitants*<sup>14</sup>, and the *Habitat International Coalition*<sup>15</sup> also make this demand. The researchers mobilized around this trend are more militant, with frequent reference to Henri Lefebvre with a desire to keep the tone of the right to the city one of revolt and indignation: [tr.] "a cry, a demand" (Purcell, 2009).

The other trend, prevalent with international organizations like the UNO and UN-Habitat, is guided by more opportunistic logic. The right to the city is first and foremost seen as a set of rights in the city and is focussed on the improvement of political and institutional mechanisms. It is therefore distinguishable from the previous in that it is based on a sort of negotiation with public authorities. The forces mobilized for the purpose also differentiate it. The bottom-up mobilization of this trend cannot force public authorities to provide collective goods and services that can enable city-dwellers to consume the city. In its 2011 report, UNESCO distinguishes "formal" rights from "substantive rights" (UNESCO, 2011). This means that this right will remain "formal" so long as the city is not financially accessible (housing), accessible in practical terms, transportation terms, as well as in terms of security and whether it is pleasant to live in (urban services). In this logic, the right to the city is arrived at through cooperation with the State. This trend has developed particularly in South Africa (Parnell, Pieterse, 2010) and the objective is consequently quite far from the revolutionary view proposed by Henri Lefebvre (Morange, 2011).

In short, on the one hand we can observe a desire to keep the right to the city subversive, and on the other, we can see an attempt by major international institutions to convert it into a sort of tool for managing urban policies. Thus, reinterpreted and readapted on the basis of the contemporary context, the right to the city certainly remains more heuristic than practical, but from now on it is definitely established as a "[tr.] powerful political concept" (UNESCO, 2011), which in a certain way, is successfully federating a worldwide movement around another possible view, if not a revolution.

However, behind the demands made by the various organizations exposing pell-mell the accelerated privatisation of public spaces, environmental degradation, the poverty of a segment of the urban population, spatial injustices, etc., there is something of a quest for an ideal city. A more egalitarian city, offering everyone the option of access to better living conditions, respectful of the environment and human rights; in short, a more harmonious city where spatial injustices would be fought, "another possible world" as recalled by the World Social Forum, the promise of a better world which would certainly recall a utopia of sorts: "[tr.] There is nothing surprising about a city being at the core of many utopias, given that a city is a pure

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.habitants.org>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.hic-net.org>

product of human creation and reveals the extent to which man can not only build a protective cocoon but also master his fate, his environment, his life context" (Stébé, 2011). The hope emerges of a city free from neoliberalism, based on the self-management of the inhabitants, the users, the citizens. But if, according to Henri Lefebvre, the right to the city was to be achieved through a new and revolutionary practice (the only option for achieving a "concrete utopia"), this practical aspect is not always actually addressed in the demands set out.

The diversity of references and deviations of the concept make its implementation complex, especially since the related ambitions increase and expand as it spreads. Therefore, the right to the city slides, indeed, converts into a moral code, a code of ethics that is opposite to the neoliberal development of the contemporary city. In the face of the fears and questions that accompany disenchantment and the overall uncertain future of this urban world, these urban social movements use this right as a possible remedy for redefining the human being's place in an environment confirmed as being "[tr.] increasingly man-made" (Stébé, 2011). A sort of ethical guide, it suggests a hope that in a certain way also conveys a return to a wish for the city in a context where it seems to have disappeared: "[tr.] the desire for a city is the concrete expression of the absence of urbanity, civility and the urban" (Stébé, Marchal, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

This will to achieve a "[tr.] new civilization" (Lefebvre, 1996) to make this urban place a "place of reappropriation" and not "a space of separation from society and the social", was at the core of Henri Lefebvre's philosophy and the source of his demand, and it is undoubtedly this trend which remains closest to the affirmation underlying the right to the city today. Conversely, its original inherent revolutionary and subversive aspect tends to fade to "[tr.] become the usual" (Lefebvre, 1981), as shown by the willingness of international organizations aiming to legislate and consolidate it within a legal foundation, which would confirm the author's fears, as he stated previously when it spread in France: "a project that is revolutionary or subversive in origin becomes usual at the point that social relations of production and reproduction, i.e. of domination, are shaken one moment and reaffirmed the next" (Lefebvre, 1981). He likely then would have expressed his suspicion with regard to the present strong "comeback" of the right to the city.

However, this renaissance of the right to the city at least has the merit of witnessing to the incessant reminder of the importance of space, not as a natural given but quite the contrary, as a space socially constructed by power relationships and as a ground for protests, like the stakes in struggles which, in the contemporary context, take on unprecedented scope. The weakness of this right is undoubtedly tied to the multiple interpretations in achieving its implementation. Without a solid anchor, all it can do is

continue to draw attention to the concomitant urban transformation of neoliberal policies. Its strength therefore lies in its willingness to promote the recognition of new values, which over time, may help speed up social change.

When all is said and done, without going into the divergences concerning its use today compared to the initial conception at the time of its establishment (Costes, 2009), the fact remains that its worldwide mobilization by various urban social movements and its demand, which at least in theory, underlies a deeper transformation of urban society, reveals a collective awareness of this concrete reality: Neoliberalism has accelerated and generalized injustices in the city.

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