



## The Right to the City: conceptual transformations and urban struggles

*O Direito à Cidade: transformações conceituais e lutas urbanas*

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**Abstract**

This article presents a history of the concept of the right to the city. The reconstruction of the concept's genesis and development draws on the relation between the history of ideas and the history of social struggles in order to show that the variety of meanings attributed to the right to the city today is decisive to its social and theoretical relevance.

**Keywords:** Right to the city; History of a concept; Henri Lefebvre; Social movements.

**Resumo**

Este artigo apresenta uma história do conceito de direito à cidade. A reconstrução da gênese e do desenvolvimento do conceito parte da relação entre a história das ideias e a história das lutas sociais para mostrar que a variedade de sentidos atribuída hoje ao direito à cidade é decisiva para sua importância social e teoria.

**Palavras-chave:** Direito à cidade; História de um conceito; Henri Lefebvre; Movimentos sociais.



## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

“Every time the fare goes up, more people are excluded from public transport. Fewer people circulating means more increases are needed, in a spiral that steadily erodes people’s right to the city”. This was one of the arguments used, on Facebook, by *Movimento Passe Livre* [Free Pass Movement] as a call to the first rally of 2014, after Mayor Fernando Haddad announced that bus fares were to be raised in São Paulo. Just over six months later, the *Jornadas de Junho* [June Protests] managed to prevent fare increases in several of Brazil’s state capitals. When the Salvador city council building was occupied in July 2013, the letter presenting the protestors’ claims to the city government said: “We are fighting for a life without turnstiles, in which citizens have the universal right to the city and to public services”<sup>2</sup>. The demand for the right to the city certainly did not date from June, but the protests gave it wider social projection. Despite forming part of the repertoire of the housing movement since the Brazilian National Constituent Assembly, the term began to appear more emphatically both in the public declarations of grassroots leaders such as Guilherme Boulos and on banners draped across occupations of empty buildings and land lots in major cities. In Recife, *Ocupe Estelita* [Occupy Estelita] evoked the right to the city in an endeavour to prevent the former Estelita docklands from being redeveloped into a luxury complex. In their dossiers, the Popular Committees organized for the FIFA World Cup listed the evictions that had been carried out to make way for building stadiums and avenues — and the police violence that accompanied it — with violations of human rights and the right to the city.

This manner of organising the claims and expressing the experience of social movements is not exclusive to Brazil. To give just one recent example, the right to the city was one of the banners under which the crowds rallied to Taksim Square in Turkey. The felling of trees in Gezi Park to build a shopping centre triggered a broad-based movement to defend public spaces and occupy the city of Istanbul. There are also self-styled “right to the city” movements, such as the Right to the City Alliance in New York, the *Recht auf Stadt* network in Hamburg and the *Pravo na grad* movement in Zagreb. As it is being expressed in so many different languages, the right to the city is an important point of

<sup>1</sup> The original paper was published in Portuguese: TAVOLARI, Bianca. Direito à cidade: uma trajetória conceitual. *Novos Estudos*, n.104, March, 2016. A slightly different version was published in English at the journal’s blog: <http://novosestudios.uol.com.br/the-right-to-the-city-the-trajectory-of-a-concept/>

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Nascimento, 2013.



contact among organised groups around the world. Meetings at World Social Forums and World Urban Forums can be seen as international arenas where movements demanding this right interconnect and build alliances. Everything indicates that the 3<sup>rd</sup> UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III), in October 2016, in Quito, will be yet another focal point where demands for the right to the city will be drawn together.

The repeated use of the term in protests over recent years has caused perplexity both in academic circles and in the public sphere. The most immediate question seems to be: what ultimately is the right to the city? What do social movements mean when they talk about this right? This text is not intended to provide a finished definition of what the right to the city is; rather, its intention is to reconstruct the different meanings attributed to the expression. In other words, the idea is to propose a kind of conceptual history of the right to the city.

For that purpose, a necessary starting point is given by the various different readings of *Le Droit à la ville* by Henri Lefebvre, published in 1968. Taking that as a point of departure makes sense only to the extent that this is not a closed discussion centred solely on a book. Already, at its origin, the concept was created in a very particular context of encounter between the university and grassroots manifestations, in which academia took to the streets and the protests occupied the university. While its genesis is framed by a dual register — one facet is theoretical and conceptual and the other concerns the practical voicing of claims —, that configuration has not been lost in the concept's present-day resumption. That is also why it would make no sense to dissociate the book from the reception it has received — rather what is interesting are the different appropriations. The reconstruction proposed by this text will focus on the link between the history of ideas and the history of social struggles, even though Lefebvre's book is the main connecting thread.

### The path back to the city

In *Marxism and the City*, Ira Katznelson argues that Lefebvre, in a series of books on urban issues inaugurated by *Le Droit à la ville*<sup>3</sup>, was the first to show Marxism the path back to

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<sup>3</sup> Katznelson, 1992, p. 93.



the city – “back” because Marx and Engels did address the city in their works, even though it was not their central concern. In its turn, the “path” is considered to have started to emerge both from conceptual questions and from questions about how to interpret the present day. The first concern was to prevent the city from being reduced to an object of a particular disciplinary field and, at the same time, from being reduced to merely the backdrop to conflicts between the productive forces and relations of production. How to formulate the “problematic of the city”, to use Lefebvre’s terms, is a kind of prior – and, at the same time, guiding – question, given that the intention of conceiving the city as a theoretical and practical totality requires the question to be left open. *Le Droit à la ville* is also considered to have secured its place as a pioneering work by venting the forceful, ambitious hypothesis that urbanisation could no longer be understood as an outcome or by-product of industrialisation. Not only had urbanisation preceded industrialisation in history, which would already indicate a dissociation between the two processes, but it had also disengaged itself from industry and gone on to impose itself throughout modernity, pointing to a tendency to a “complete urbanisation of society”, to use the vocabulary of his later writings<sup>4</sup>.

If it is no longer industrialisation that drives social change, then neither alienation nor class struggle can be understood as exclusive to the domain of the factory or production. This clears the way for thinking about the reification of the daily life in the city, about a new urban misery framed by the commute between home and work, and pre-programmed lives devoid of spontaneity, where urban intervention and planning under the aegis of technique contribute decisively to intensifying social divisions. The consequence of this hypothesis entails nothing less than re-signifying the meanings of both domination and freedom. By no coincidence, the horizon of emancipation is designated by the expression the “right to the city”.

In *The Urban Question* and *Social Justice and the City* — both published in the early 1970s and central to what would come to be known as the new urban sociology and, later, the critical urban studies<sup>5</sup> —, Manuel Castells and David Harvey credit Lefebvre with a pioneering role, but their agreement goes somewhat further than that. Although they accept the terms in which the prior question is couched and extend the critique of urbanism and urban planning, both show that they discredit Lefebvre’s central hypothesis

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<sup>4</sup> Lefebvre, 2008, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> See Zukin, 1980.



of the complete urbanisation of society, which they regard as unfeasible and not able to be empirically verified. Neither Castells, from the perspective of Althusser's structuralism, nor Harvey, whose contact with Marxism was still recent, intended to go as far as to invert the relation between urbanisation and industrialisation.

There is one important difference between them, however, as regards their interpretation of the right to the city. Castells levels strong criticism at what he regards as a concept that is too abstract, utopian and ideological to think about communist society. He feels that the notion of centrality proper to the right to the city would relapse into a kind of trans-historical essence resting on the notion that assemblages in space, by their very nature, would generate new social relations. Castells felt that Lefebvre was aware of the problems involved in that argument: "This is why he [Lefebvre] adds the condition: *providing this concentration is free of all repression*; this is what he calls *the right to the city*"<sup>6</sup>. For all repression to be suppressed, one would have to think first of a city without a State, which would identify the right to the city with communism. To Castells, the shift from "city" to "society" is one of the problematical points in this association. Another point of attrition is that Lefebvre sees demands for housing as an obstacle to the emergence of the "urban problematic". Because Castells came to understand urbanisation in terms of the reproduction of the labour force, social movements' struggles for housing became central, paving the way for a specific field of study<sup>7</sup>. A conception on which demands for housing are understood as a kind of blindness that prevents people from seeing what is most important is thus incompatible with the argument that urban social movements are able to counter the established order on the basis of the contradictions specific to the urban question.

Harvey, meanwhile, does not mention the "right to the city" — neither the expression nor the book — for exactly three decades from the publication of *Social Justice and the City*. It is true that the reception of Lefebvre's book was delayed in English speaking countries. *Le Droit à la ville* was not translated into English until 1996, and then not as an individual book, but as part of an anthology<sup>8</sup>. In Harvey's case, however, the question seems to be less the difficulty posed by language and more a deliberate

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<sup>6</sup> Castells, 2009, p. 146, original emphasis.

<sup>7</sup> See Castells, 1973; Castells et al., 1978; and others.

<sup>8</sup> Lefebvre, 1996.



distancing<sup>9</sup>. His concerns were directed mainly to capitalism's overall functioning, and the city is considered within that framework: by immobilising investments in space, urbanisation becomes central to the creation of value and, thus, to surmounting the crises of over-accumulation engendered from within the system. The notion of *spatial fix* he developed has this dual usage: at the same time as investments and labour become "fixed" in space, it is also by means of urban space that these crises can be "fixed". While it is true that class struggle is an important guiding thread when analysing the circuits of capital in Harvey's writings, it is also true that contemporary resistances were a little off that map. It was not until *Spaces of Hope*, in 2000, that he turned to the concrete demands for rights from workers and organised social movements. It was even later that the right to the city gained any attention – first in 2003, in a small and little-known essay, and later in 2008, in an article published in the *New Left Review*, which was to become one of the leading references for the academic debate and for social movements<sup>10</sup>.

Accordingly, even though they positioned themselves as giving continuance to some of Lefebvre's contributions, these authors did not seem to regard the right to the city as having sufficient immediate explanatory or programmatic potential to be developed into the key hinge between Marxism and the city. While Castells had already made these criticisms of the concept explicit in the 1970s, David Harvey seems to have perceived only much later the force that the concept had gained. Today, authors who claim to be critical in the field of urban studies necessarily mention the right to the city or endeavour to give their own interpretation of the concept — which thus involves returning to Lefebvre's works.

In the light of this critical matrix, the current interest in the right to the city is seen as a *revival* of an author who, despite his position as a pioneer, had been practically forgotten and, for a long time, had been read only in restricted academic circles with little influence. So it is right to wonder what has changed in this thirty-year interval for the book's ideas to be debated intensely both in academic circles and in the public sphere. Such a reading, however, approaches the reception of *Le Droit à la ville* from a very specific standpoint, that of North American and European academics, who came to give

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<sup>9</sup> In the conclusion to *Social Justice and the City*, written after the articles that make up the book, Harvey explores the key arguments of *La Révolution urbaine* and *La Pensée marxiste et la ville*, which Lefebvre had published, respectively, in 1970 and 1972. *Le Droit à la ville* is not mentioned. See Harvey, 2009, pp. 302-303.

<sup>10</sup> Harvey, 2003; 2008. To give some idea of the diffusion of this latter piece, *piauí* magazine published a translation into Portuguese in its July 2013 issue (Harvey, 2013a).



importance to the right to the city following, with decades of distance, organised social movements in several countries, whose vocabulary of claims has long included the term, and an scholarship that wrote in languages other than English. The question must, therefore, be put differently. This means looking at how the concept has been mobilised over the years, and accordingly not assuming that the resurgence was unexpected. For that purpose, I will avail myself of a cut-off and a shortcut.

### The reception in Brazil

Although in the 1970s and 80s these discussions found fertile ground in Latin America as a whole, my cut-off restricts this analysis to Brazil. The shortcut, meanwhile, is given by a footnote in James Holston's most recent book:

Of greater importance for the 'rights turn' in the urban social movements was the influence of Henri Lefebvre's work on 'rights to the city' and 'everyday life' as the arena of political struggle, Manuel Castell's on the 'urban question and grassroots movements', and David Harvey's on 'social justice and the city'. These ideas captured the imaginations of planners, architects, lawyers, and social scientists, who promoted the urban social movements and who eventually became leaders of NGOs and local government.<sup>11</sup>

From this extract it is possible to build on certain premises. The first is that Lefebvre's, Castells' and Harvey's main ideas became widely known in Brazil. They did not simply spread, however, but were embraced in a positive light and in a symbolically powerful manner — not only were they deployed in academic texts, but they “captured the imaginations”. Although Holston does not mention it, this reception took place during the Brazilian civilian-military dictatorship, in a context where notions of law, justice and democracy carried even greater social weight. The second is the major repercussions these ideas produced in many different disciplinary fields as a result of the links forged between intellectuals stemming from various areas and urban social movements. The third premise is the mediation function performed in this period by activist intellectuals: it was through them that the movements began to learn of, and to claim, the right to the city. It now remains to reconstruct *how*, or rather *in what terms*, these ideas “captured the imaginations” of militants in the 1970s and 80s. The mentions of the right to the city

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<sup>11</sup> Holston, 2008, p. 349.



made by these intellectuals give the guiding thread for mapping the reception of the ideas. The way they formulate the question is certainly not equivalent to how the social movements — who also did (and do) not form an unified bloc — constituted their demands or thought about their own condition. Nonetheless, this is one way to access a common imaginary of which both movements and intellectuals can be said to form part.

In Brazil, there ensued a combination of apparently largely irreconcilable conceptions: an amalgam between Lefebvre's right to the city and the notion, developed by Castells, of urban social movements' struggles for access to urban facilities for collective consumption. This hypothesis is helpful for understanding how a concept that emerged from a diagnosis of a new urban misery, where the satisfaction of basic needs no longer figures as a central problem, could find such wide acceptance in the Brazilian context.

In Brazil, the first academic contacts with Lefebvre's work were not made through his books on urban space. The reception of his works took at least two distinct paths. The first was the "sociology of everyday life", prompted both by currents within Marxist thought — which, strongly influenced by Thompson's and Castoriadis' thinking, rejected the notion that social behaviour could be deduced from the laws of accumulation or from given objective conditions — and by the emergence of social movements that made everyday matters a theme of their political demands<sup>12</sup>. Another entry point was the systematic reading of Marx's *Capital*. It was in the mid-1970s that José de Souza Martins began to hold seminars on the book, at the same time as professors and researchers at Sao Paulo University's Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism were turning their attention to the study of land rent<sup>13</sup>.

In both cases, the study of Marx provided the necessary mediation for a reading of contemporary authors in the Marxist tradition, among them Lefebvre<sup>14</sup>. Accordingly, his ideas on urban matters became a central issue only to the extent that researchers in geography, architecture and urbanism began to take an interest in reading about them. The reception of *Le Droit à la ville* was facilitated by at least two factors. Firstly, the book was translated right after its original publication<sup>15</sup>. As Lefebvre's other books on urban themes would not be published in Portuguese until much later, it became his best-known

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<sup>12</sup> For the influence of Lefebvre's concept of the everyday life, see Martins, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> See Arantes, 2009, p. 18 et seq.

<sup>14</sup> See Martins, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Portuguese and Spanish translations were published in 1969 (Lefebvre, 1969a; 1969b).



work among researchers in the urban studies. The right to the city came to be read by Marxist intellectuals, by researchers who came to the subject of the city by way of the concept of “everyday life” and by others coming directly from urban studies more broadly<sup>16</sup>.

While Ermínia Maricato did mention the book in 1976<sup>17</sup>, it was in the 1980s that she argued the need to “broaden awareness” of the right to land in order to “build awareness” of the right to the city, as a way of bringing a new quality to grassroots demands, now looking ahead to the National Constituent Assembly<sup>18</sup>. In contrast with the specific nature of the struggle for the right to land, the right to the city would involve a broader conception: thinking about how the city is unequally produced. In other words: “In the city we want not only land, we want the right to citizenship, the right to the city life” – Maricato expressly tied this demand to Lefebvre’s notion of festival<sup>19</sup>. Pedro Jacobi also drew the association between the right to the city and citizenship:

Are all the people who live in the city citizens? Not really. In fact, everyone has the right to the city and the right to see themselves, and to act, as citizens. In practice, though, the way modern cities grow and develop, what happens is a de-urbanised urbanisation. [...] The right to the city means the right to a city life, to housing, to dignity. It means thinking about the city as a space to be used and enjoyed in everyday life, as a place for meeting, not for holding apart<sup>20</sup>.

And also: “The right to the city represents, above all, thinking about a democratic city, a city that severs its ties to the past”<sup>21</sup>.

These texts published in the mid-1980s raise some important points for this reconstruction. In the first place, the articles are conjunctural and intervention-oriented, using language directed to a broad readership comprising mainly the social movements themselves. Both Maricato and Jacobi endeavour to guide these struggles. In Maricato’s case, the proposal was to expand the existing demand for the right to land, connected with the banners of agrarian reform and with the occupation of large land lots in major cities. Jacobi, meanwhile, relates the right to the city to a range of aspirations: a democratic city that makes meeting possible, where power relations are challenged and

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<sup>16</sup> The shortcut given by Holston suggests that the term “right” in the book’s title roused the interest of lawyers, but there are hardly any references to Lefebvre in legal texts of the 1980s. The situation changed after the 1988 Constitution and the 1989 bill, which was passed in 2001 as the Statute of the City.

<sup>17</sup> Maricato, 1979, p. 83. The article was first presented in 1976.

<sup>18</sup> Maricato, 1985.

<sup>19</sup> Maricato, 1987, p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> Jacobi, 1986, p. 22, original emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> Jacobi, 1986, pp. 23-25.



where everyday life can be transformed. He situates the right to the city on the register of a demand for something “more”, not just for house or land, not just for the city as it stands.

To both, urban segregation *deprives* the population of rights: the right to the city is taken to be universal — “Everyone has the right to the city”, says Jacobi —, but the city is a *de facto* denial of that notion<sup>22</sup>. Considered as a right of citizenship, denial of that right can be considered to negate all others. Posed in these terms, the issue was explicitly bound up with the historical process of restoring democracy, because the horizon of political change once again allowed room for imagining how the city might be. In that respect, both authors’ imaginations turned to some of the components formulated by Lefebvre (even though Jacobi does not even cite him explicitly): the possibility of meeting and festivity, of transforming everyday urban life, of radical democracy and of challenging existing power relations.

In addition to being deployed in intervention texts, the right to the city also gained portions of the scholarship. We are not talking about research projects divorced from politics, but about theses written in university postgraduate programmes, with a less conjunctural character, but no less concerned with expectations for social change. In his dissertation, Nabil Bonduki uses the term to demarcate periods in the struggles of urban social movements in São Paulo. From 1945 to 1947, demands from the urban periphery converged to mark the dawning of a “growing *awareness* of the right to the city — that is, to urban facilities (water, electricity, transportation, paved roads, schools and so on)”<sup>23</sup>. Here, the right to the city was identified with demands for improved infrastructure in poor neighbourhoods, demands that were directed primarily to the public authorities.

In the second, post-1964 phase, the demands for essential basic services were not abandoned, but were now seen as connected with broader issues, such as citizenship and democracy: “in this period, the issue of lack of citizenship figures as subsuming both the withdrawal of political rights and the denial of the right to the city; this endowed urban struggles with broader scope as part of efforts to regain citizenship and political and social democracy”<sup>24</sup>. In the first mention, the right to the city involves a series of concrete demands for the implementation of collective public facilities. Bonduki does not cite Lefebvre, because – among other reasons – a formulation of this kind would hardly be

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<sup>22</sup> The same perspective can be found in Ribeiro, 1986, p. 143.

<sup>23</sup> Bonduki, 1986, p. 45, my emphasis.

<sup>24</sup> Bonduki, 1986, p. 46.



found in *Le Droit à la ville*. It corresponds more closely to the perspective developed by Castells, without the author having denominated it as the “right to the city”. The emphasis here is not – as in Lefebvre – on establishing an urban centrality, on the possibility of encounters or on a fruition not mediated by exchange value, but on achieving minimum standards of living and on the “awareness” formed in pursuing these claims, which is regarded as having generated broader demands for democracy.

Turning to the field of geography, one sees that – although Lefebvre is quite widely studied among geographers – the concept of the right to the city was little explored in the 1980s. Arlete Moysés Rodrigues argues that struggles for housing and the use of land in *favelas* should be understood as demands for the right to the city, but offers no further explanation of the concept, simply referring it to *Le Droit à la ville*<sup>25</sup>. Ana Fani Alessandri Carlos’s thesis, whose central concern is to show that the production of urban space forms part of the process of capital accumulation, criticises — in a chapter devoted to the class struggles in the city of Cotia — the limited nature of social movements’ demands for installation of collective facilities. She points to the need to surpass “the understanding of the city considered as exchange value, from the standpoint of the need to provide the population with collective consumer goods”<sup>26</sup>. Although Lefebvre links use value to a conception of the city as artwork, these elements are dissociated here: “I believe that the discussion of urban transformation should hinge on the consideration that the reproduction of life is not limited to the satisfaction of material needs. The human endeavour directs us to the path taken by Lefebvre in thinking about the city as a *work of humanity*”<sup>27</sup>. In the terms used here, it is as if the amalgam of Castells’ and Lefebvre’s conceptions had shifted the right to the city out of the terrain of the new urban misery and given greater emphasis to social criticism and to the redistribution of collective facilities in urban space.

But the most important thesis for the social movements’ theory and for interpreting the restoration of democracy in general is by Eder Sader. Here the right to the city is mentioned only in a footnote summarising the ideas of the chapter, which draws on the experience of workers in the city of São Paulo in order to reconstruct the

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<sup>25</sup> See Rodrigues, 1981, p. 161 and Rodrigues, 1988, p. 161.

<sup>26</sup> Carlos, 1994, p. 231. The thesis was defended in 1987.

<sup>27</sup> Carlos, 1994, p.231, original emphasis.



grounds on which social movements emerged in the 1970s<sup>28</sup>. At the height of the military dictatorship, public spaces used for political expression and sharing had been destroyed:

This is physical destruction of culturally significant places, as a result of the overwhelming pace of urban remodelling: squares and parks, commons, meadows, bars or whole city blocks disappeared, dissolving spaces for shared living established by everyday encounters in the city. [...] The very conception of urbanism that presided over the remodelling of the metropolis in those years expressed the arrogance and contempt with which the governing technocracy treated the quality of life of those with no motor car and living outside the city's more exclusive areas<sup>29</sup>.

Although very different, this description does recall Lefebvre's characterisation of the misery of everyday life — urban restructuring projects destroying meeting places, places for leisure and political discussion; a technocratic, planning-oriented rationality disregarding existing social relations; and the distance between centre and periphery being made even more gaping in commuters' lengthy travel times between home and work. Nonetheless, everyday life is not regarded as a setting for alienation in a life fated to repetition, but a sphere of resistance. Unlike Lefebvre, in Sader's writing there is no bundle of guaranteed basic services that would be the basis for the "new misery" — the social issue is incontestably in the foreground. But Sader also points to the formation of democratic experience inside the social movements — as his book's title puts it, these are "new characters", because they see themselves as subjects of their own history and they organise autonomously.

The reception shows that there was no systematic intention to say what the right to the city is or even to discuss its status. One point in common among all the writings — both academic and intervention oriented — is the assertion that the right to the city is not limited to the movements' immediate demands for specific urban rights or services; it is considered to be these demands as a whole, it points to other notions such as democracy, citizenship and autonomy and it is a constitutive component in the social movements' forming a shared consciousness or experience. It also shows that, at that moment, the "right to the city" was not a native category, that is, it was not deployed by those who were protesting. It is much more an attempt to organise fragmented struggles by a common denominator, to broaden specific agendas to a more comprehensive context with non-immediate political objectives, to give meaning to the appropriation of the city's

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<sup>28</sup> Sader, 1988, p. 121, note 83.

<sup>29</sup> Sader, 1988, pp. 118-119.



spaces and to the struggles for rights, in the endeavour to express changes in the political culture of urban social movements. Particularly, it is used as a category for understanding these movements' emergence — and less as a concept associated with a book by a French philosopher in the Marxist tradition, which should be contextualised or modified to suit the Brazilian case. What is certain, however, is that the part of the concept that relates to rights gains greater force in Brazil than in the European context. The movement of May 1968 did not express its grievances in the language of rights. For Brazilian urban social movements, the language of rights was decisive. That is one of the reasons an almost immediate connection was established between the right to the city and citizenship, one hardly considered by Lefebvre. Another important point of the imaginary of the right to the city is the break with the primacy of technical considerations when deciding on urban policies: the critique of technocracy had an especially strong appeal in the context of the civilian and military dictatorship, where political participation was barred on principle and where major construction projects had significant social impacts. Meanwhile, the amalgam between Castells' and Lefebvre's conceptions can be expressed by the need to understand the social movements organised around issues linked to social critique. Denial of rights and exploitation are far more part of the vocabulary of grassroots demands than the struggle for an authentic city that can be enjoyed as a work of art, even though the suppression of public and leisure spaces have had important consequences for the workers' everyday lives.

### **From a revolutionary project to an empty signifier**

The term spread in academic circles, in the demands of the widest variety of social movements, at international conferences, in legislation and institutional proposals by a number of countries and, as it did so, there began to emerge a critique of the range of meanings attributed to the right to the city. The plurality of meanings came to be interpreted as a lack of conceptual precision — the right to the city was felt to have become an “empty signifier”<sup>30</sup>, a vague, non-specific concept<sup>31</sup>, a conceptual “umbrella”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Harvey, 2013b, p. xv.

<sup>31</sup> Fainstein, 2009, p. 27.

<sup>32</sup> Schmid, 2012, p. 42.



or “vortex”<sup>33</sup>, a “catchphrase”<sup>34</sup> — which, to some authors, was the main cause of its loss of critical potential, as if the right to the city had captured the imagination to too great an extent and could now make practically any urban issue its theme<sup>35</sup>. For this literature then, precise definition of the term’s meaning was a precondition both for a noise-free discussion and for what was regarded as a critical perspective to prevail over the others. The first task would be to define what the right to the city is — and that meant going back to the work of Lefebvre in order to reconstitute the meaning of the concept at its origin and thus to determine the criterion for gauging what deviated from the original. This call for definition produced a competition over the best way to read the work of Lefebvre, which came to be the common ground that organised the divergences among positions, the terrain where the different interpretations were constructed, validated and contested. There was thus an endeavour to answer a prior question situated on a purely conceptual plane, divorced from contemporary social struggles — it would lie in the terrain of what Lefebvre “meant”.

In one passage in *Le Droit à la ville*, Lefebvre states that “the right to the city is like [announces itself [*s’annonce*] as] a cry and a demand”<sup>36</sup>. To Peter Marcuse, that is the best definition, since the cry is connected with basic needs and the demand, with generalised discontent. According to Marcuse, this passage leads one to the conclusion that Lefebvre was talking about a “non-juridical” right, he was talking about a moral demand grounded on principles of justice. Mayer too interprets Lefebvre’s text in this way: she argues “the ‘right to the city’ is a less a juridical right, but rather an oppositional demand, which challenges the claims of the rich and powerful”<sup>37</sup>. In order to differentiate political and moral status from the legal dimension, Marcuse distinguishes plural rights *in* the city — the right to housing, to transport, to use public amenities, to participate in local decisions and so on — from the singular right *to* the city. The latter, which would require the city’s complete transformation and make space for a self-managed social organisation, he regards as being the meaning that Lefebvre actually intended. The main problem though, would be to confuse these two registers and, thus, void the right to the

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<sup>33</sup> Kuymulu, 2013a, p. 923.

<sup>34</sup> Purcell, 2002, p. 100.

<sup>35</sup> See Mayer, 2012, Souza, 2010 and others.

<sup>36</sup> Lefebvre, 2009a, p. 107; 2009b, p. 117. Translation: LEFEBVRE, Henri. *Writings on Cities*. Translated and edited by Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p. 158.

<sup>37</sup> Mayer, 2012, p. 71.



city of content or equate it with a language of rights understood as liberal and in itself corrupt<sup>38</sup>.

In one of his more recent books, Harvey resorts to the same formula of a cry and a demand to give his interpretation of what Lefebvre meant<sup>39</sup>. However, in his most famous text, “The Right to the City”, he defines the concept on the basis of an extract from a sociologist who does not address the right to the city, Robert Park, one of the leading representatives of the Chicago School, whom Harvey expressly combatted in the 1970s. For Harvey, the right to the city was to be understood as a human right of *another kind* because it was collective, inalienable and allowed the city to be transformed according to the heart’s desire, which would challenge the capitalist system. The formula that associates the right to the city with the heart’s desires is repeated to exhaustion by the commentary literature, without any major objections being raised to the transposition of a subjective feeling to a collectivity or even as to the status of this “other” right, given that Harvey seems to disregard the existence of other collective human rights.

There is also a second current that reads Lefebvre’s work in order to show the properly juridical implications of the right to the city — or, to use Mitchell’s words, to assert that law matters<sup>40</sup>. It is not the authors’ intention to downplay the philosophical and political dimensions, but rather to show how the properly juridical and institutional meaning of the right to the city is contained in Lefebvre’s work, even though he did not explore this range of arguments directly. To Attoh, it is necessary to explore the inconsistency of the conception of right assumed in the literature and therefore to define whether the right to the city is a subjective right, an immunity, a first-, second- or third-generation right or a moral right to break the law. Not defining it would leave the concept radically open, which is seen as problematical for failing to take a position in the political dispute, besides leading to confusion among diverse, mutually incompatible conceptions. Edésio Fernandes recognises the importance of *Le Droit à la Ville* but claims that the concept is to be found in more finished form in Lefebvre’s last book, *Du Contrat de Citoyenneté*, published in 1991. In this book, the right to the city is included in a list of human rights that extends the Declaration of 1789 and lays the bases for a new social

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<sup>38</sup> See Kuymulu, 2013a, p. 927.

<sup>39</sup> Harvey, 2013b, p. x.

<sup>40</sup> Mitchell, 2003, p. 21 et seq. See also Fernandes, 2007 and Attoh, 2011. For the position that the right to the city is a social right: Trindade, 2012.



contract. In this work, the social function of property and grassroots participation are interpreted as the content of the right to the city.

However much one organises the literature into two approaches, all the authors aim to define the form and content of the right to the city in advance. The call for definition is a problem to the extent that the intention is to crystallise a single meaning as right or true, as if it were possible to extract some perennial essence of the concept. In this way, concrete social struggles around the term cease to be taken seriously when one portion of them is discarded as mere deviations from some original concept. Each of the definitions is thus yet another way of disputing what the right to the city ought to be. To claim that it is possible to determine what Lefebvre “meant” is to obscure the interpretative nature of a text that is open to more than one reading. Discussion will be gridlocked as long as the literature continues to direct its efforts to seeking definitions. Not only will posing the question in terms of original versus deviation and true versus corrupted not lead far, it will impede the construction of a diagnosis of the deployment of the right to the city in all the meanings in which it occurs. However, this impasse in the literature also points to a real problem. This groping for juridical definition of the right to the city expresses not only the lack of conceptual rigour or of knowledge about this right, it signals an attempt to understand something that does not fit neatly into existing institutional categories, but involves the most widely differing demands by movements around the world. This shows that it is the social demand itself that is indeterminate, which should be regarded not as a *shortcoming* — as a lack of specificity or rigour —, but rather as the formation of a common field of discussion. The right to the city is one of the few watchwords that manages to bring together the most widely differing social actors and this occurs not *despite* the multiplicity of meanings attributed to the term, but *exactly because* of the possibility of projecting so many meanings onto the same single expression. The strength of the right to the city resides in the fact that it is not a concept deployed only by academics, nor only a political rallying cry or institutional proposal. It is not taken up solely by the public sphere, academia, the State or international organisations. It cannot thus be reduced to “protest” or “programme”. This means that, from the outset, no position on the concept has been excluded and all its vectors continue



to coexist, that is, thus far no institutional arena has formed where all the most extreme positions of the spectrum would be left out<sup>41</sup>.

### **From an empty signifier to the common denominator of social struggles**

The year 2013 seems to have marked a turning point in the literature on the right to the city. Particularly as a result of the June protests in Brazil and in Turkey, many of the authors who had argued that the concept had ceased to have any meaning began to affirm the contrary: that its critical potential was stronger than ever, that the term had come to unify the left and that attentions should be turned to the movements that were occupying streets and squares<sup>42</sup>. Expectations for change and projections of justice, democracy and equality in the city were all deposited in the struggle for the right to the city. This was true not only of the social movements, but also of attempts by academics to interpret recent protests. The perplexity left by the revolts of 2013 and by the movements that continued to draw inspiration from their ideas — to compare with previous protests, the closest model is given precisely by May 1968 — posed a need to find new explanatory keys and a new vocabulary, of which the right to the city certainly forms part. In the case of the struggle for housing, talking about the right to the city points to a greater collective dimension than the one expressed by the right to housing. Being homeless means not only having nowhere to stay physically in the city, but not belonging in its social ties. Without a fixed address, it becomes practically impossible to get a job or enjoy most public services, for example. When the right to, and access to, housing are denied, belonging to the city is also denied — and that dimension, in that it determines who can be part of the city, is not only individual. The phrase “A city only exists for whoever can move around it”, one of the slogans used by the Free Pass Movement, is also representative of this collective aspect. The bus fare hikes not only violated the right to transport but precluded those who could no longer afford the fare or who spend long hours travelling between home and work from even experiencing the city.

From the conceptual history outlined here, it can be glimpsed that, to the extent that streets and squares of large cities have become established as centre stage for recent

<sup>41</sup> The main model for the formation of an institutional arena where a concept is in dispute and positions are excluded is the discussion on the “sustainable development”. See Nobre, 2002.

<sup>42</sup> See, for instance, Kuymulu, 2013b; Holston, 2014; Maricato et al., 2013; Marcuse, 2014; Purcell, 2015.



social struggles, the right to the city will continue to be at the centre of grassroots demands and to figure both as an analytical category and a horizon of emancipation. This shows that, as a byword, the right to the city manages to unite the widest variety of social actors, from the more to the less organised. This happens not only because it is possible to project a great variety of meanings onto the term, but also because, through it, it is possible to articulate both social criticism and a critique grounded on loss of authenticity and freedom<sup>43</sup>. Movements for housing, urban land and public transportation foreground the social misery of the homeless, the landless and those who cannot move around the city or who live in situations where eviction is imminent. The precariousness of conditions of life evidences exploitation and inequality, a repertoire bound up with social criticism. These demands could very well be voiced in terms of specific rights — to housing, to land and to transport —, but linking them to the right to the city means no longer treating them as isolated issues. Meanwhile, the movements struggling for parks and street cinemas, against major construction projects such as shopping centres and luxury residential developments, place emphasis to the loss of meeting spaces, the inauthenticity of neighbourhoods and the standardisation of cities. The repertoire of these demands is linked to a new urban misery, in that there is a struggle going on to maintain spaces that are characteristic of cities, for leisure and spontaneity.

In addition to congregating the two types of critique, demands for the right to the city introduce a particular innovation. While it is true that certain movements organise for this right to become law or to figure in an international treaty recognised by the United Nations, the protests of 2013 showed that the demand for the right to the city is not necessarily directed to institutionalisation in the form of law. One of the novelties lies in the fact that saying “right” does not necessarily entail expressing that demand in State law. For that reason, it is not only a new form of citizenship that is at stake, but also a new way of understanding law.

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<sup>43</sup> For the distinction between social criticism and artistic [*artiste*] criticism, see Boltanski; Chiapello, 2009.



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