

## Special section: Urban neoliberalism, urban struggles, and ‘the right to the city’

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*Dedicated to the memory of Neil Smith, 1954-2012*

### Introduction

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The strategy and demand for ‘the right to the city’ (RTC) was first advanced by the great Marxist social scientist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre in the late 1960s. For Lefebvre, the RTC was the design, production and control of all aspects of the city by the collective working class. Having been little used over the next 25 years, since the 1990s the slogan has been taken up by urban movements in many countries. These movements have often used RTC to refer to the right to the use of urban public spaces and the right to live in (central or inner) cities. It has also referred, more widely, to the right of residents to participate in decisions on spending by local governments, and to economic arrangements for supply of affordable housing. The RTC was even incorporated into the new constitution of Brazil in 2001. During this period a considerable left academic literature on the RTC has also appeared (for example Mitchell, 2003; Sugranyes and Mathivet 2010; Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer, 2011).

In 2008 David Harvey, the Marxist geographer and urbanist, published an influential essay on the RTC, in which he argued for the usefulness of the slogan while giving it a particular interpretation. In 2011 the radical Turkish-language *Journal of Economics* commissioned interviews with the Marxist geographers Neil Smith and Jamie Gough on the RTC, Harvey’s article, and contemporary urban politics more generally; the interviews were carried out by Ozlem Celik and Cagri Carikci. This section of *Capital and Class* contains the two interviews, previously unpublished in English. In September 2012 Neil Smith died at the age of 57. This section contains an appreciation by Jamie Gough of Neil’s major contribution to the development of Marxist and revolutionary geography.

This section starts with a brief history by Jamie Gough of the idea of ‘the right to the city’ (RTC), particularly for readers who are not urbanists. This explains the power and appeal of the slogan, but also the variety of meanings in which it has been used.

## A brief history of ‘the right to the city’

Jamie Gough

In the late 1960s and early 1970s Henri Lefebvre’s writing was devoted to ‘the city’ (more precisely, urban and rural localities), particularly in *The Right to the City* (1968/1996) and *The Urban Revolution* (1970/2003), and to theorising ‘space’ (the geography of human society) more generally, particularly in *The Production of Space* (1974/ 1991) [1]. *The Right to the City* appeared just before the general strike and student revolt in France which heralded the long wave of crisis in the imperialist countries. Lefebvre’s first motivation in writing about the city was to awaken the Left, and in particular the French Communist Party, to aspects of life which it had previously neglected. Lefebvre believed that the urban realm had become the crucial site for capital accumulation. Moreover, beyond the realms of production and the waged economy, Lefebvre regarded social life and culture - popular sensibilities, a way of life, as well as cultural products – as deeply political, class questions. This interest arose from Lefebvre’s Marxism, which incorporated a good dose of German idealist philosophy (Hegel, Nietzsche). Accordingly, he wanted to develop a critique and socialist politics of the social and cultural aspects of capitalism, which form such a large and visible part of cities and city lives: residential life, housing, street life, commercial buildings and cultural monuments, the meaning of places, modes of transportation, varied urban cultures and sensibilities, and so on. But this was not merely sociology or cultural studies: he wanted to integrate an understanding of these aspects of life with political economy; and he wanted to emphasise how space (area, distance, scale) is not merely a passive container of social processes but is an essential, active moment of them. In short, he was interested in the entire set of inter-related social relations within localities and linking them.

Lefebvre’s critique of the contemporary capitalist city was for the most part rather abstract. The city privileges exchange value over use value. It embodies alienated work and alienated patterns of consumption and spectacle (Lefebvre was associated at one stage with the Situationists). It thus fails to meet and in fact violates human needs and desires, and also violates the natural world. The capitalist land market creates fictitious capital in land, renders territory as ‘abstract space’, and imposes value-processes onto every urban activity. A somewhat more concrete critique is of social space within the city. The promise of the antique and Renaissance city was of a place of meeting, social encounter and interaction, conversation and debate, social conflict and politics – a kind of concentration and ‘centralisation’ of social relations. But in the modern city, residence is decentralised to lifeless dormitory suburbs, and the centre city is completely appropriated by the ruling class. Moreover, the residential areas become increasingly differentiated and separated by income, ethnicity and culture. Thus the strong degree of *socialisation* inherent in the city is increasingly contradicted by its social-spatial *fragmentation*.

A revolutionary politics of the city is therefore required to overthrow these oppressive processes, and remake the city to realise human needs and wants. The subject of this politics is the working class, understood in its Marxist sense of those dependent on wages. The working class comes to collectively control the labour of production and social reproduction. This implies collective *design* of production processes and products, of buildings and infrastructures, and above all of the organisations (the concrete social relations) that run these day to day. The working class becomes the creative class. Lefebvre sometimes depicted cities, both capitalist and in the future, as *oeuvres*, literally ‘works’, which can be understood as both labour (‘road works’, ‘steel works’) or as in ‘a work of art’. In the socialist city it is

the majority who create the city through labour *and* design, ‘mental’ and ‘manual’ work. It is this *control* of the city in *all* its aspects, whether practical, moral or aesthetic, material or symbolic, which Lefebvre called ‘the right to the city’. Note, then, that this is something completely different from a bourgeois-democratic right; and it goes far beyond a right to be *in* the city.

As to how such a RTC can be developed, Lefebvre gives some hints. Radical ideas can develop out of ‘heterotopias’, that is, places within capitalism in which social praxis can begin to challenge, or at least partly escape, from capitalist social relations. But this does not imply that development of the RTC proceeds through propounding and setting up utopias – of which there have been a myriad over the history of capitalism: Lefebvre derides utopian approaches. He proposes that scientific knowledge and concepts of the city, the expertise of urbanists and planners, are a vital moment in the development of a revolutionary politics of the city, albeit that this knowledge is put at the service of social movements, in dialogue with them, rather than providing them with technocratic blue-prints. The development of the new city has to be feasible.

The slogan of the RTC largely disappeared from left academic urbanism and activism in the thirty years after Lefebvre’s major writings on the city. But since the 2000s it has been revived, though used for the most part in more restricted senses than Lefebvre’s: the right of all groups *to use public spaces* of the city, and the right for *the poor to remain living* in central and inner areas of the cities. These issues have arisen from important developments which have been common in many cities across the world in the last two decades or so. Firstly, political protests on local, national and global issues which have taken place in public spaces of the city (squares, streets) have in many cases been repressed by the police or army. The protestors, and the left more generally, has perforce had to demand the right to be in those public spaces. Secondly, the eviction of the poor from central and inner areas of cities and their expulsion to the periphery or from the city altogether has become pervasive in both the Minority and Majority Worlds. The growth of finance, business services and the media in central cities, and the attendant increases in the number of professional workers in cities, have led to the wish of property developers to redevelop areas of housing of the poor towards high-income housing and consumer services, as well as offices. The poor have been evicted through market mechanisms of gentrification, but also, increasingly, through state-led ‘urban regeneration’. This led Neil Smith to argue that gentrification of inner cities had become a major, global strategy for capital accumulation (Smith, 2002). This process exacerbated the exclusion of ‘undesirable people’ from public space: public spaces were to become solely areas of ‘normal’ consumption; homeless people, working class youth, ‘potential muggers’ and so on were increasingly excluded. This has taken place both through direct policing and through privatisation of shopping areas (new malls, private management of existing streets). In these contexts, the slogan of the RTC has been used mainly to point to the right of people to *live in* the city, or to live in central and inner city areas. The most systematic use of the term has been in the US, where the RTC Alliance of community campaigns was set up at the US Social Forum in 2007, bringing together campaigns on housing of the poor and the right to use public space as well as on other social reproduction issues (Harvey, 2012: xii; Smith, this issue). Much of the left academic literature on the RTC has focused on these rights; for example, Don Mitchell’s *The Right to the City* (2003) focuses on the use of public spaces in the US for political protests; other important urban texts focus on this subject but without using the term RTC (for example Low and Smith, 2006; Graham 2010).

A rather different use of the RTC originated in urban politics in Brazil. It came out of the struggles for housing, infrastructures and public services which developed strongly in the 1990s, a central basis for the growth of the Workers' Party during that time. Where the Workers' Party took control of municipal governments, these popular demands were given formal expression, and also managed, by the process of 'participatory budgeting' pioneered in the one-million population city of Porto Alegre by a left current in the Workers' Party. In participatory budgeting, neighbourhood and city-wide community organisations debate the allocation of *given* municipal funding to different services and infrastructures and to different spaces within the city (refs: from SSE). This led to the RTC being incorporated into the new national constitution of 2001 made by the Workers' Party. Note the ambiguity of the notion of 'rights' here. The right to participate in decisions on the allocation of the local state budget is a *political* right based on electoral democracy. In contrast, the right to housing, sewers and clean water, or education and health services of a certain quantity and quality cannot be guaranteed by political rights but only by class struggle; this is true a fortiori of 'the right to employment' which is largely outside the control of local government.

David Harvey's essay 'The Right to the City' argues for Lefebvre's very broad meaning of the slogan: a collective struggle for control over urban economic resources going well beyond individual political rights. However, most of the essay is devoted to a discussion of the role of investment in the built environment (buildings, physical infrastructures) in the history of industrial capitalism. Following his work over four decades, Harvey argues that this circuit of capital is vital for capital as a whole as a way of absorbing over-accumulated or 'surplus' capital, results in waves of massive investment in the built environment; these always in the end lead to over-investment, fall in prices and devalorisation of new constructions, which feed through to bankruptcies of property capitals and massive write-downs of their debt to financial capital. This process was at the heart of the financial crash of 2007-8. Harvey's focus on this particular aspect of urbanism leads him to propose that "establishing democratic management over [the] urban deployment [of the surplus] constitutes the right to the city" (2008: 37). The link of property- to money-capital is reflected in his suggestion that the RTC "has to be a global struggle, predominantly with finance capital" (2008: 39). Thus although Harvey sometimes implies a strategy of RTC as broad as Lefebvre's, his main emphasis is on control of investment in the built environment and hence of its spatial forms.

The two interviews below discuss some of these ambiguities and possible uses of the term RTC. This discussion is framed by wider consideration of contemporary urban problems and urban struggles.

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## Notes

1. For a very useful account of Lefebvre's writing on cities, see Kofman and Lebas (1996).