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HENRI LEFEBVRE, THE RIGHT TO THE CITY, AND THE NEW METROPOLITAN MAINSTREAM

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The phrase "the right to the city" has been making a comeback as a rallying cry in recent years. In cities of the North and the South alike, it is used by urban social movements, by political alliances, by international organizations, and also at academic conferences. A closer look reveals, however, that its usage varies considerably. It often serves just as a kind of conceptional umbrella for all types of political and social demands that generally address the problems arising in urban areas today (see also Mayer, this volume; Marcuse, this volume).

The renaissance of the slogan is remarkable, as it hearkens back to the late 1960s, a specific moment in the history of urbanization. At the time, it was coined by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre in response to the urban crisis of that period. However, the situation then was quite different from the one today. The resurgence of this rallying cry therefore raises some important questions: Are we experiencing a new urban crisis? What are its specific traits and characteristics? What distinguishes it from earlier phases of urbanization? In order to clarify these questions, it is useful to return to the original conception of the term and explore its (potential) meanings for urbanization today.

The urban crisis and the right to the city

The crisis of the city

Lefebvre's concept of the "right to the city" is based on his investigation of urbanization in France during the 1960s (Stanek, 2011). Like most of the Western industrialized nations, France was marked by the ascent of Fordism and the expansion of the Keynesian welfare state. This development was accompanied by massive migration from rural to urban areas and a fundamental

change in spatial structures. Functionalist urban planning led to a restructuring of inner city areas; the margins of the cities were dominated by mass production of social housing as well as by an extensive proliferation of single-family detached housing units.

These urban transformations also entailed a fundamental modernization of everyday life. Contemporary critics conceptualized this specific aspect of urbanization as a "crisis of the city."[1] For Lefebvre, this crisis consisted primarily of a tendency towards the homogenization of lifestyles and an engineering and colonization of daily life. In middle-class suburbs and in working-class housing estates, analogous conditions prevailed – the monotony of the labor process, the order of functionalized and bureaucratized cities, and the normative constraints of the modernized urban everyday life (Lefebvre, 1996).

The right to the city

The "crisis of the city" was also an important departure point for the manifold social movements of the late 1960s. They were not only aimed against Western imperialism and the Vietnam war, or against various forms of discrimination and marginalization. They were also directed against alienation in daily life, against the modernization of cities and the destruction of their specific qualities, and against exclusion from urban life. They were struggles for a different city.

Lefebvre regarded these events, especially those of May 1968 in Paris, as parallels to those of the Paris *Commune* of 1871. Programmatically, he demanded a "right to the city": the right not to be displaced into a space produced for the specific purpose of discrimination.

> In these difficult conditions, at the heart of a society which cannot completely oppose them and yet obstructs them, rights which define civilization [...] find their way. These rights which are not well recognized, progressively become customary before being inscribed into formalized codes. They would change reality if they entered into social practice: right to work, to training and education, to health, housing, leisure, to life. Among these rights in the making features the *right to the city*, not to the ancient city, but to urban life, to renewed centrality, to places of encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses, enabling the full and complete *usage* of these moments and places, etc.
>
> (Lefebvre, 1996: 178)

Thus, Lefebvre's concern was not to propose a new comprehensive slogan demanding the right to the basic needs. It was about something more – a specific urban quality, which had hitherto been neglected in public debate: access to the resources of the city for all segments of the population, and the possibility of experimenting with and realizing alternative ways of life.[2]

Struggles for the city

Demands for a new and renewed urban life were raised repeatedly during sub-sequent years in many places and in multiple forms. For many of these urban actions, urban movements, and also urban revolts, documentation is fragmentary; their history has yet to be written.[3] In these struggles, different demands and frontlines can be identified (see also Mayer, this volume).[4]

In many places, mainly young people protested against the lack of urban life and demanded fulfillment of the "urban promise" that cities were constantly offering and yet constantly breaking: the promise of liberty, opportunities for encounter, urban culture, and appropriation of public space. These struggles entailed efforts to create alternative cultural venues and community centers as well as squatting, resistance to large-scale projects, and struggles against the diverse forms of gentrification. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, many cities in Italy, Western Germany, the Netherlands, and even Switzerland experienced urban revolts: they were expressions of a palpable lack of urban lifestyles; the focus was on alternative culture, but also on the struggle for public life, for tolerance, and for openness. Many other urban moments could be mentioned in this context, such as the battles against gentrification in Manhattan's Lower East Side in the mid 1980s, the Toronto metropolitan strike of 1996 or the uprisings that flared up in Athens in 2008. In recent years, moreover, there have been increasing instances of urban movements in major East Asian cities such as Hong Kong, Beijing, and Seoul.

Quite different strategies of contestation were adopted in struggles to enhance the participation of less privileged and socially disadvantaged groups: especially in the neglected inner-city districts and suburbs of the West, which in some cases developed into "territorial traps," there were many waves of struggle against social exclusion. There has been a long history of resurging revolts and clashes in the French *banlieues*, especially in and around Paris. Other countries also experienced uprisings in neglected neighborhoods, such as in 1981 in London's Brixton district, mainly populated by an African–Caribbean community, or in 1992 in South Central LA, to mention only two examples.

Even longer is the list of urban struggles in the exploding megacities of the global South. In particular, these include social movements in informal settlements and shantytowns against displacement and neighborhood destruction as well as often successful struggles for improved living conditions and infrastructure. In Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s, urban movements were formed that have in some cases become significant political forces, including at the national level. For instance, major urban social movements developed in Mexico City after the devastating earthquake of 1985, or in São Paulo during the same period.

Despite the many differences, there are obvious similarities among these urban struggles: they can be understood, in the most general sense, as struggles against social exclusion and marginalization, and they articulate a demand for

centrality, for access to the material and immaterial resources of a city. In this sense, they address the spatial dialectics of center and periphery, and of appropriation and domination.

Complete urbanization and the specificity of the urban

Urban social movements

Against the background of these manifold urban struggles, the crucial question is how the urban dialectic can be conceptualized. In Paris in the early 1970s, Manuel Castells and his colleagues developed the concept of "urban social movements."[5] However, this concept encompasses only a small segment of urban reality, and it mainly takes into account those movements that are oriented towards "collective consumption" (see Mayer, this volume). This reflects a very narrow conception of the city as a unit for the daily reproduction of labor power and a narrow political perspective that is focused mainly on organized forms of protest and ignores many spontaneous actions and revolts.

Conversely, Lefebvre's reflections were based on a far more open and radical notion of the urban.[6] He did not, however, develop a definitive theory of the urban, but embarked on a quest that continued to produce new insights into the phenomenon of urbanization. Therefore, the excavation of isolated passages from his work cannot fully represent the fluidity and openness of his reflections; their significance often only unfolds in the context of his complete works.

Tellingly, Lefebvre's first major statement of his emergent urban ideas and concepts, entitled *Le droit à la ville* [*The right to the city*], was presented in the "mythical" year 1968 (Lefebvre, 1996). Only two years later, however, he subjected this first approach to a fundamental review and extension in another major book, *La révolution urbaine* [*The urban revolution*] (Lefebvre, 2003). The main critique in this latter work concerns precisely the notion of the "city" itself: his search for the urban had led Lefebvre to a radical shift in his perspective, from the analysis of a *form*, the city, to a *process* – urbanization.

Complete urbanization

The point of departure of this new understanding of the urban is Lefebvre's famous thesis of the complete urbanization of society. This thesis states that contemporary social reality can no longer be grasped with the categories "city" and "countryside," but must be analyzed in terms of an emerging urban society. The epistemological shift involved here cannot be overestimated. Lefebvre's theory constitutes a radical break with the traditional Western conception of the city. The classic definitions of this notion were based on the assumption that the city is a clearly identifiable unit that provides the environment for a distinctively "urban" way of life. For instance, Simmel (1971 [1903]) regarded

the city as a cultural form and postulated a nexus between urban morphology and the social organization of coexistence. Similarly, Wirth (1938) famously defined the city as a "way of life" built upon three specific material factors of coexistence: size, density, and heterogeneity.

Against these definitions, Lefebvre's thesis of complete urbanization points towards a long-term conception of urban transformation. As Friedrich Engels in *The condition of the working class in England* (2009 [1844]) had already recognized, the Industrial Revolution marked the beginning of a massive migration from rural areas to the cities in conjunction with the spatial concentration of factories and workers under industrial capitalism. Lefebvre proceeds to conceptualize the process of industrialization in a general sense as the extension of the industrial logic to society as a whole. Industrialization and urbanization, he states, form a highly complex and conflictual unit. Industrialization supplies the conditions and means of urbanization, while urbanization results from the spread of industrial production across the entire globe. From this point of view, Lefebvre derives his understanding of urbanization as a reshaping and colonization of rural areas by an urban fabric as well as a fundamental transformation of historic cities.

The crucial consequence of this transformation is the dissolution of the city itself: for Lefebvre, the city can no longer be understood as an object or as a definable unit. It is instead a historical category that is disappearing as urbanization progresses. This also means, however, that the term "city" itself becomes problematic:

> The concept of the city no longer corresponds to a social object [...] However, the city has a historical existence that is impossible to ignore. Small and midsize cities will be around for some time. An image or representation of the city can perpetuate itself, survive its conditions, inspire an ideology and urbanist projects. In other words, the "real" sociological "object" is an image and an ideology!
>
> (Lefebvre, 2003: 57)

The question thus arises as to how the urban can still be theoretically grasped under conditions in which society as a whole has been urbanized. Lefebvre's inquiry into this question yields three core concepts: mediation, centrality, and difference (see also Schmid, 2005; Kipfer et al., 2008).

The urban level: mediation

In a first approximation, Lefebvre identifies the urban as a specific level or order of social reality. It is an intermediary and mediating level situated between two others – on the one hand, the private level, the proximate order, everyday life, and dwelling; on the other hand, the global level, the distant order, the world market, the state, knowledge, institutions, and ideologies. This intermediate

level has a decisive function: it serves as a relay and as mediation, connecting the global and the private levels.

In urbanized society, however, the urban level is in danger of being whittled away between the global and the private levels. On the one hand, industrialization and the logic of the global market produce a universal rationale shaped by technology, and thus a tendency towards homogenization. The unique traits of the place and its location thus seem to disappear. On the other hand, space is parceled out and submitted to a corporate, individual logic. In this attack from "above" and "below," the city is threatened with attrition. The result is the dissolution of urban units, which disintegrate into countless disconnected fragments, leading in turn to the proliferation of overflowing, apparently indistinguishable urban landscapes.

Thus, the complete urbanization of society tends to eliminate the urban level of mediation. However, it is only in the most extreme thesis of the disappearance of the city that the importance of the urban becomes visible for Lefebvre. In this context, he suggests, the city must be seen as a social resource. It constitutes an essential device for the organization of society, it brings together diverse elements of society, and thus it becomes productive.

The urban form: centrality

These considerations enable Lefebvre to arrive at a new definition of the city – the city as a center. In this sense, the city creates a condition in which heterogeneous elements no longer exist in isolation. As a place of encounter, communication, and information, the city is also a place in which constraints and normality are dissolved, and are joined by the elements of the playful and unpredictable:

> The urban is defined as the place where people walk around, find themselves standing before and inside piles of objects, experience the intertwining of the threads of their activities until they become unrecognizable, entangle situations in such a way that they engender unexpected situations.
>
> (Lefebvre, 2003: 39)

For Lefebvre, the space–time vector converges to zero in urban space; every point can become a focal point that attracts all, a privileged place upon which everything converges. The city is thus the virtual nullification, the negation of distances in time and space: "the cancellation of distance haunts the occupants of urban space. It is their dream, their symbolized imaginary, represented in a multiplicity of ways" (Lefebvre, 2003: 39).

Centrality therefore does not refer to a concrete geographic situation, but to a pure form. Its logic represents the synchronicity of objects and people that can be assembled around a given point. What is it that comes together in urban space? Centrality as a form does not entail a concrete content, but

merely defines the possibility of an encounter. It constitutes itself both as an act of thought and as a social act. Mentally, it is the synchronicity of events, of perceptions, and of the elements of a whole. Socially, it amounts to the convergence and combination of goods and activities. Centrality can thus also be understood as a totality of differences.

Urban space–time: difference

This leads to the third marker of the urban – the city is a place of difference. Differences are points of active connection and should be clearly distinguished from particularities that remain isolated from one another. Particularities are derived from nature, location, and natural resources; they are bound to local conditions and are thus derived from rural society. They are isolated, external, and can easily revert into antagonisms. However, in the course of history, such particularities come into mutual contact. Out of their confrontation arises a mutual "understanding" and thus difference. The instant of confrontation is always a decisive one. Transformed by the confrontation, the elements no longer assert themselves in isolation from one another. Instead, they can only present and re-present themselves in and through their interactions. This gives rise to the concept of difference. The concept emerges not just from logical thought, but along a variety of paths – the trajectories of history and of multiple dramas in everyday life.

Therefore, the specific quality of urban space arises from the simultaneous presence of very different worlds and value-systems, of ethnic, cultural, and social groups, activities, and knowledge. Urban space creates the possibility of bringing together these different elements and making them productive. At the same time, however, they have a constant tendency to separate themselves from one another. The decisive question therefore is how these differences are experienced and lived in actual everyday life.

As Kipfer (2008) reminds us, there is an important distinction between minimal and maximal difference. Minimal or induced difference tends towards formal identity, which fragments everyday life and pushes social groups into the periphery. Maximal or produced difference implies a fundamental social transformation. The concept of difference as defined by Lefebvre must therefore be clearly distinguished from other, postmodern definitions. For Lefebvre, difference is a multidimensional concept that arises from gaps in the fabric of everyday life and from political struggles. It must be understood as an active element.

The urban as concrete utopia

Lefebvre's notion of the urban thus differs fundamentally from the classic conceptions in urban theory. Criteria such as size, density, or heterogeneity as once defined by Wirth can hardly be applied to analyze the reality of the

contemporary city. Thus, the size of a city can no longer be determined unambiguously, and the significance of that criterion is quite limited – smaller cities can also attain a high degree of urbanity. The density of a city has a limited influence on the quality of everyday life either. And finally, heterogeneity is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition of urban life. Rather, the decisive question is whether productive differences arise between the heterogeneous elements. Therefore, the essence of the city is determined not by size, density, or heterogeneity, but by the quality of active, everyday processes of interaction.

In a Lefebvrian framework, the city can thus be defined as a place where differences encounter, acknowledge, and explore one another, and affirm or cancel out one another. Distances in space and time are replaced with opposites, contrasts, and superimpositions, and with the coexistence of multiple realities. Lefebvre's positive conception of the urban as differential space–time should be understood as referring to a concrete utopia (Stanek, 2011). It points towards a possibility, a promise, not an already achieved reality. It must constantly be produced and reproduced (Lefebvre, 2003: 38).

This also means, however, that the term "city" itself becomes problematic. Accordingly, Lefebvre himself amended the term "the right to the city" with other terms: "the right to centrality" (Lefebvre, 2003: 194), "the right to difference" (Lefebvre, 1991: 64), and finally "the right to space" (Lefebvre, 1978: 317).

The production of urban space

A three-dimensional dialectic

As has become clear, Lefebvre opened up a new pathway towards defining the urban in La révolution urbaine. First of all, it constitutes the level of mediation between the global and the private. Secondly, its form is centrality, assembly, encounter, and interaction. Finally, the urban is characterized by difference; it is a place where differences come together and generate something new. This leads to the question of how these different aspects are related to each other, and how they are socially produced. It gives rise to a new radical shift in analytical perspective. It requires a more general term and a more general theory – the term "space" and the theory of production of space, which Lefebvre elaborated in La production de l'espace [The production of space] in 1974 (Lefebvre, 1991).

This theory rests on the assumption that the production of space can be split analytically into three dialectically linked dimensions or processes. These dimensions – which Lefebvre also refers to as "formants" or "moments" in the production of space – are defined in duplicate. The first is the triad of "spatial practices," "representations of space," and "spaces of representation"; the second is the "perceived," "conceived," and "lived" space. This duplicate string of terms points to a twofold approach to space: a phenomenological approach on the one hand, and a linguistic or semiotic approach on the other (Schmid, 2005, 2008, 2010).

Urban practice

Space has, first of all, a perceptible component that can be grasped with the five senses. It relates directly to the materiality of the elements that constitute a space. Spatial practice combines these elements into a spatial order, an order of synchronicity. Urban space is therefore a place of material interaction and of physical encounter. This practical aspect of mediation, centrality, and difference can be seen as the superimposition and interlacing of networks of production and of communication channels, as a combination of social networks in everyday life, as places of encounter and exchange that are amenable to surprises and innovations.

This means that urban space can be empirically observed. What is happening in the streets? Who is present, who encounters whom? What resources are available, and who has access to them? Primarily, what is meant here is the physical presence of people in urban space. Very often, in urban research only the residents of an urban area are considered. But urban space also includes those who work there, visitors, street vendors, and diverse types of places. Shops, restaurants, meeting places, and venues for cultural and social exchange set the stage for urban life. These may be permanent facilities or ephemeral occasions – events or celebrations that create opportunities and chances for interaction.

Opportunities for social interaction are, however, unequally distributed across urban space. In certain places, urban resources are concentrated, while in other areas they are thinly scattered and diffuse. The question of access to these resources is immediately linked to their distribution. The struggle for the right to remain within urban space has always been among the central questions provoked by urban revitalization programs, gentrification, or projects for slum improvement.

Due to the huge expansion of urban areas today, though, this issue is no longer confined to the traditional urban core areas. The classic model of urbanity based on the examples of metropolises such as Berlin, Paris, or Chicago has long been overtaken by worldwide urbanization processes. In the overflowing cityscapes of the North and the South, manifold new forms of centrality have evolved. While these new urban configurations have long been discussed (Soja, 1996; Sieverts, 2002), such discussions have yet to shed concrete light on the particular question of what new forms of urbanity are emerging and evolving in these areas. In order to make some progress in this direction, it would be necessary to demarcate new definitions of "urbanity" or "urban quality" based on the effects of interaction processes in urban space. For the mere presence of different social groups and networks is not sufficient for the emergence of an urban culture. What matters, rather, is the way they interact and the quality of these interaction processes. Differences must always be understood dynamically. Is the outcome an open exchange, or are differences curtailed and domesticated? Such questions also pertain to the immaterial conditions of

communication – the rules and norms governing urban spaces. This brings us to the second moment in the production of urban space – the conception of space.

The definition of the urban

As Lefebvre noted, a space cannot be perceived without having first been conceived in the mind. A conceived space is therefore a depiction that reflects and defines a space and thus also represents it. The combination of individual elements into a whole that is subsequently regarded as space requires a mental effort. Constructions or conceptions of space are supported by social conventions that define which elements are related to one another and which ones are excluded – conventions that are not immutable, but often contested, and which are negotiated in discursive (political) practice. This is a social production process that is connected to the production of knowledge and power structures. In a broader sense, the representations of space also include social rules and ethics.

Our conception of the "city" therefore depends on society's definition of the urban and thus on the idea of the city, the design, the map, the concept, or the scientific theory that attempts to define and demarcate the urban. As a representation of space, the urban initially remains undefined in an urbanized world. Since the city no longer forms a distinct social or economic unit, or a discrete mode of production or way of life, there are many ways of defining and demarcating a city. Such definitions of the city always contain mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion and thus become battlegrounds for a variety of strategies and interests. All kinds of political and economic actors, urban specialists, and intellectuals intervene in this field, and urban movements may also have considerable impact.

These definitions do not mark the end point; they immediately translate into political questions, for they are directly connected to rules and norms that define who and what is admissible or prohibited and what is included or excluded in urban space. Often, implicit distinctions and invisible boundaries play important roles here that are hidden to the outside observer. Thus, if the "right to the city" is once again demanded today, the question immediately arises as to which "city" this right refers to. Does the demand relate to old or inherited conceptions and images? Is it a demand to reconstitute the "classic" city? Or are new forms of the urban being sought?

The urban experience

The third dimension in the production of space is what Lefebvre calls "spaces of representation." These are spaces that signify "something." They refer not to space itself, but to a third, other aspect – for instance, a divine power, *logos*, the state, or the male or female principle. This dimension of the production of

space refers to the process of signification, which is expressed in (material) symbolism. The production of significance imparts symbolic meaning to spaces and thus turns them into spaces of representation. This aspect of space is encountered or experienced by people in their everyday life, which is why Lefebvre also calls it "*espace vécu*," a space that is lived or experienced. A lived, practical experience cannot be fully grasped by theoretical analysis. "Something" always remains, an ineffable residue that defies analysis and that can only be expressed by artistic means.

The city is thus always also a concrete, practical experience, a place of its residents who use it and appropriate it in their everyday practices. The nature of a "city" is something that its inhabitants learn from infancy – and something they combine with their memories. These worlds of experience and processes of socialization also give rise to implicit value systems. Whether a city is perceived as a refuge of civilization, or as a dangerous and unpredictable place, is due mainly to such experiences.

It is therefore crucial in this context which experiences are inscribed in space and in the collective consciousness. Such experiences contain both collective and individual aspects; they include positive and negative values; they may be banal and commonplace or spectacular and far-reaching. Struggles for the city themselves are constitutive elements of such urban experiences. They facilitate concrete processes of appropriation and the recognition that urban spaces can be used in different ways than were previously envisaged. Thus, urban "moments" such as May 1968 in Paris are crucial reference points whose effects persist many years later, influencing contemporary debates and urban practices in distinctive ways.

Urbanization and urbanity

The theory of production of space therefore includes, at core, a three-dimensional production process – first, material production; second, the production of knowledge; third, the production of meaning. These three dimensions of the production of space form a contradictory, dialectic unity. The determination is a threefold one; space is only produced through the interaction among all three elements.

Space is the result of production processes that take place in time. This basic presupposition leads to a dynamic conception of urban space as being constantly produced and reproduced. Urban qualities do not appear automatically as the result of urbanization. Urbanization lays the groundwork for generating urban situations, but the latter are created only as the result of multiple actions. This also implies a constant struggle over the content of the urban. Concrete, "lived" urbanity is the outcome of continuous conflicts and contestations. "The city" is not a general category, but a concrete, historical one that is perpetually being renewed and redefined – both in theory and in practice.

From this point of view, the "right to the city" may be redefined as the "right to (urban) space" – that is, as the right to participate at the transformation of space and to control investment into space (Lefebvre, 1978: 317).

The new metropolitan mainstream and the commodification of the urban

The rediscovery of the urban

Based on the theoretical reflections sketched above, it is possible to decipher some key aspects of global urbanization during the last few decades. Indeed, the history of recent urban struggles reveals a remarkable set of trends. While urbanization has accelerated and generalized, there is also strong, albeit diffuse, evidence in many places that urban spaces are being reclaimed. This process has been shaped and advanced in manifold ways. Urban social movements have resisted the transformation and modernization of their cities, fought against commercialization and displacement, and demanded old and new forms of urbanity, mixed districts in the city centers, street life, and public spaces. At the same time, they have created many kinds of concrete urban spaces and alternative, oppositional everyday practices, often based on cultural, ethnic, or sexual differences. During the course of the 1970s and 1980s, these "urban values" were increasingly embraced by broader social strata. This marked the beginning of a long history of a "rediscovery of the urban," a trend which is sometimes also labeled an "urban renaissance" (Porter and Shaw, 2008).

This rediscovery of the urban was also closely intertwined with the dynamics of globalization, which has been closely associated with new forms of centrality and agglomeration.[7] Two aspects are essential here. On the one hand, centrality plays a key role for global economic control and command functions and for certain forms of innovation, especially those that require a wide variety and multiplicity of inputs for the development and creation of complex products. On the other hand, metropolitan centers became privileged spaces for the new urban elites that had formed under the neoliberal development model (Sassen, 1994; Scott, 1998).

The "other side" of centrality was now revealed – the resurgence of the city as a center of decision making and control. Long before the proliferation of scholarly interest in "global cities" and "world cities," Lefebvre had already predicted the consolidation of new forms of global centrality:

> Despite countervailing forces [...] the centre continues effectively to concentrate wealth, means of action, knowledge, information and "culture." In short, everything. These capacities and powers are crowned by the supreme power, by the ability to concentrate all powers in the power of decision.
> (Lefebvre, 1991: 332–3)

At the same time, the metropolitan centers are becoming high-grade consumer products, and indeed manage to survive due to their simultaneous role as places of consumption and as consumable places. The urban cores are thus turned into citadels of power, while their population becomes an elite (Lefebvre, 1996: 73; Lefebvre, 2003: 79). Lefebvre's clear-sighted analysis sketched a development whose full effects are only today becoming widespread – the global city model has now become generalized, as "metropolitan" values, cultures, and lifestyles are widely accepted and sought after. A corresponding set of urban strategies and policies have come to form the new general guidelines of urban develop- ment – the metropolitan has become mainstream.

The new metropolitan mainstream

The term "new metropolitan mainstream" was developed to decipher a broad range of phenomena that have recently emerged in cities around the world.[8] Initially, this mainstream is articulated as a norm that defines what is to be regarded as urban or metropolitan while also presenting certain standards and processes for urban planning and design. Richard Florida's theses on the "crea- tive class" (2005), which have had a significant ideological impact in urban policy in cities around the world, only mark the tip of the iceberg in this regard (see Peck 2005; as well as Krätke's chapter in this volume). These and other relatively banal ideas about how to ignite urban "growth" have been diffused among municipal governments and city councils around the world. The promotion of "soft" location factors, of "quality of life" for elites, and of a prestigious blend of cultural amenities and offerings for luxury consumption is today part of the standard policy repertoire for attracting capital investment and highly qualified workers. Accordingly, many contemporary cities both in the global North and in the global South have been equipped with skyscrapers, flagship projects, and "star" architecture. The "standard metropolitan archi- tecture" is becoming the new fuel of global urbanization. In this context, a remarkable shift in the role models for the "urban future" has occurred. Today, "new" metropolises such as Dubai, Shanghai, or Singapore are much more likely to be seen as exemplars for the future of urban development than the "old" Western metropolises such as Paris or New York (Roy, 2010).

The consequences of these local development strategies for local populations are obvious. The longstanding debates on gentrification and the vociferous criticism of urban regeneration and urban revitalization projects do not need to be revisited here (see Slater, this volume; Smith, 2002; Porter and Shaw, 2008). Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that processes of gentrification and dis- placement have spread tremendously in recent years while also becoming more differentiated. First, private and public strategies are increasingly intertwined, with urban policies now actively promoting gentrification and the attendant displacement of marginalized populations. Second, many of these strategies are actually proposed and implemented by left-wing and liberal political coalitions.

Closely linked to this development are the manifold processes by which selected segments of erstwhile oppositional milieus are integrated and co-opted into the new metropolitan mainstream. Third, the various forms of urban upgrading are also now increasingly spreading on a global scale, into the cities of the South, into suburban areas, and even into smaller cities. Fourth, these trends also entail a significant rescaling of urban development. Processes of gentrification and displacement are no longer limited to individual neighborhoods; rather, entire intra-urban areas and even large parts of metropolitan regions are upgraded and transformed into zones of reproduction for metropolitan elites. A massive increase of land and real estate prices and the accompanying housing crisis have already imposed heavy restrictions on access to these areas for less privileged parts of the population.

In the current debate, such strategies and policies are often equated with neoliberalism. Indeed, cities and metropolitan regions have become places of strategic importance for neoliberal policies, and key institutional arenas in and through which neoliberalism is itself evolving (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Leitner et al., 2007). Nevertheless, we must remember that such processes should be regarded as elements of long-term tendencies in capitalist urbanization. Urbanization leads not only to the dissolution of historic forms of the city and to urban sprawl, but also to the formation of new centralities. Centrality is always ambivalent in this context, since on the one hand it creates possibilities for unexpected encounters, while conversely, it is also susceptible to economic exploitation. This ambivalence brings us to yet another process – the commodification of urban life.

The commodification of the urban

This development, of course, is not a new one. The city has long been the place where the market has installed itself and flourished, and it also constitutes the privileged arena in which the world of commodities unfolds – as Walter Benjamin (1995 [1955]) analyzed so brilliantly for the late-ninteenth century metropolis of Paris. What is new, however, is the systematic economic exploitation of urban space. The city itself, urban life, becomes a commodity. This process can be described as the commodification of the urban (Kipfer and Schmid, 2004; Kipfer et al., 2008).

As Lefebvre noted, this strategy goes far beyond simply selling space, bit by bit. Space itself, and not only the land and real estate, becomes exchange value. As a consequence, urban space becomes the very general object of production, and hence of the formation of surplus value:

> The deployment of the world of commodities now affects not only objects but their containers, it is no longer limited to content, to objects in space. More recently, space itself has begun to be bought and sold. Not the earth,

> the soil, but social space, produced as such, with this purpose, this finality (so to speak).
>
> (Lefebvre, 2003: 154)

The commodification of the urban has not yet been grasped adequately in all of its dimensions and implications. This process encompasses not only the sale of parcels of land, and the reservation of exclusive locations for certain population groups. At stake, more generally, is the process by which urban space as such is exploited. The entire space is sold – including the people living in it, as well as the social resources and the economic effects produced by them. Urban life itself is implicated in the economic process of valorization and is thereby transformed.

This means that the qualities of urban space – difference, encounter, creativity – become part of the economic logic and of systematic exploitation of productivity gains. Such processes have long been visible in the occupation and control of public space by private actors – shopping malls, entertainment centers, or private railway and metro stations constitute quasi-public spaces that are controlled by private interests. Their *raison d'être* consists exclusively in generating added value. Accordingly, they are designed to channel urban life into commercially exploitable avenues and to prioritize market-oriented and consumption-oriented practices. These forms of economic domination are today beginning to spread across entire urban areas. In the process, the people, residents and visitors alike, are reduced to mere "extras" in the great urban spectacle.

Appropriation and domination

At a general level, the question of center and periphery is thus transformed into the antagonism between productive and non-productive ways of consuming space, between capitalist "consumers" and collective "users." The contradiction between exchange value and use value, when transferred to space, thus becomes the contradiction between capitalist domination and the self-determined appropriation of space (Lefebvre, 1991: 356, 359).

This implies the question of both economic and political control. This aspect of control is ultimately decisive in the privatization of public space and in the creation of manifold forms of privately controlled space, from demarcated and segregated districts to gated communities. Access to the urban arena with its opportunities and possibilities is controlled and economically exploited. Thus, certain social groups succeed in reserving urban spaces for themselves and limiting access for others. It is often forgotten that these spaces do not exist in isolation, but are part of a concrete historical and geographic context, and positioned strategically within their respective urban regions. Thus, the entirety of urban life is transformed (Eick et al., 2007).

Centralization and peripheralization

Another aspect of centralization must be mentioned in this context – displacement and exclusion from centrality. The dialectics of center and periphery must today be reconsidered. It has long ceased to be determined in geographic terms, and neither does it always follow the logistical principles that are the basis of transportation infrastructure (Veltz, 1996). Rather, centrality today implies the availability of manifold possibilities and access to social resources. Conversely, peripheralization stands for dispersion, demarcation, and exclusion from urban life. This was already problematized in the debates on world cities and global cities in the 1980s and 1990s – it inspired the metaphor of "citadel and ghetto" (Friedmann and Wolff, 1982), the "dialectics of centrality and marginality" (Sassen, 1994), and also the concept of the "quartered city" (Marcuse, 1989). Today, this dialectics is articulated in a new form insofar as the less controlled, relatively non-commercialized interstitial spaces within the metropolitan cores are now almost completely disappearing.

From a general point of view, this is a manifestation of the fundamental contradiction within the dialectic of the urban. On the one hand, the social potential of urban space lies precisely in its capacity to facilitate contacts and mutual interaction between the various parts of society. On the other hand, access to urban resources is increasingly controlled and appropriated by global metropolitan elites. This not only limits access to urban space but also imposes limits on its social productivity. In this process, urban space loses some of its essential elements, but especially its most important characteristic – the possibility of unexpected, unplanned encounters and interactions.

The urban as concrete utopia

Theory and practice

In contemporary society, the urban always remains ambiguous, as it is determined by a twofold dialectical movement between centralization and peripheralization on the one hand, and between appropriation and domination on the other.

This theoretical determination must be translated into concrete terms. Theory is a construction that should not be confused with reality. While theory follows the laws of logic, practice is determined by the development of society in everyday life. Therefore, the relationship between theory and practice is always complex and contradictionary (see Brenner, this volume; and Marcuse, this volume). As Lefebvre stated succinctly, theory must be steeped in practice in order to become effective. In practical terms, this means that theoretical analysis must be confronted with practice. Doing so is always a social act and an intervention in social reality, and thus also a confrontation, an exchange, and an encounter where theory itself is transformed.

As Lefebvre indicates, the point of departure of critical social theory should always be everyday life, the banal, the ordinary. Changing everyday life: this is the real revolution! Everyday life is today marked by urbanization, and we must therefore study its potential. With complete urbanization, the city is becoming virtually omnipresent, and any point has the potential to become central and be transformed into a place of encounter, difference, and innovation. This means viewing urbanization from a different point of view. Urbanization creates the possibility of an urban society. But it must be realized. There is no automatism involved. This is precisely the historic lesson that Lefebvre is communicating.

The right to the city today

Forty years ago, Lefebvre observed the rise of a new *problematique* and intro-duced the slogan "the right to the city." Obviously, the situation today is no longer the same, and we are living in a completely different urban world. Nevertheless, it is precisely in this situation that this call is heard anew, in the "global West" as well as in the "global South." In this context, the call for a right to the city also acquires new importance and a new content. Three ten-dencies are particularly noticeable here.

First, the focus today is once again on basic needs such as access to shelter, food, clean water, health, and education. This is due largely to the massive urbanization of the global South, but also due to increasing levels of socio-economic polarization in major parts of the world. As the dramatic example of the destruction of New Orleans has shown, there are situations in which the fulfillment of even the most basic needs is no longer guaranteed. In this context, the notion of the right to the city acquires a new significance.

Second, the call for a right to the city also represents a response to the with-drawal of the (national) state from many areas of social life. Significant tasks are today delegated to the regional or local levels. This has not only imparted new importance to the local, but has also caused increased fragmentation, seg-regation, and inequality. The various alliances that have coalesced around the rallying cry of the right to the city demand – and, through their practice, in fact constitute – a new unity in the splintered and fragmented urban regions.

Third, such alliances also today facilitate the formation of new collec-tive moments. Even if many alliances appear, at first glance, to be pursuing a rather pragmatic course (see Mayer, this volume), they contain the potential to reframe the urban question, to discover new, self-determined definitions of the urban in the sprawling urban landscapes, and to open up possibilities for conceiving and living different forms of urban life.

Over a decade ago, John Friedmann (1993: 139) stated in his text *The Right to the City* that "a city can truly be called a city only when its streets belong to the people". More recently, David Harvey's influential text with the same title defined the right to the city as the right to control the urbanization process and to institute new modes of urbanization (Harvey, 2008: 40). Although he was

writing in an earlier moment, Lefebvre's analysis actually went one step further by postulating a generalized form of self-management (*autogestion généralisée*) as the basis and expression of that right (Lefebvre, 2003: 150). Ultimately, this means the rearticulation, in a radically new context, of the long-standing demand for the right to self-determination – a right that is indispensible for the creation of a different society.

Possible urban worlds

Today, the world is being jolted by a major economic crisis. Many of the issues identified by Lefebvre have apparently been relegated to the background. Nevertheless, it should be clear that even under these new conditions, the right to the city must include more than merely the right to exist and to satisfy basic needs. This "more," this additional aspect, is precisely what defines urban society. The urban is a constant reinvention, it may assume very diverse forms, and the purpose here is not to propose yet another range of normative models. This, however, implies viewing the contemporary urban crisis as an opportunity to imagine alternatives and to create new possible urban worlds.[9]

Thus, the same old issues are at stake, albeit in a new context: What is a city, and what does urban living mean? Who is to determine the urban future? Lefebvre opened up a new pathway towards understanding urbanization. In his analysis, urban society is not an already achieved reality, but a potential, an open horizon. The quality of this analysis is that it transcends mere criticisms of urbanization, and proceeds to explore its inherent possibilities and potentials. However, they can only be realized through a fundamental social transformation – an urban revolution.

The grand theoretical and practical project that Lefebvre envisioned consists of exploring possible pathways towards an urban world where unity no longer positions itself in opposition to difference, where the homogenous no longer battles the heterogeneous, and where assembly, encounter, and interaction replace – though not without conflicts – the struggle of individual urban elements that have been turned into antinomies by segregation. Such an urban space would constitute the social basis for a transformation in everyday life that is open for manifold possibilities – for a radically different world.

Notes

1 Compare e.g. Jacobs, 1961, or the polemical critiques of urbanism published in *Internationale Situationiste.*
2 For a discussion of Lefebvre's conception of the right to the city, see also Purcell, 2002; Gilbert and Dikeç 2008; and Schmid, 2010.
3 Until recently, there have been relatively few books dealing with urban social movements – see, for example, Mayer et al., 1978; Castells, 1983, INURA, 1998; Hamel et al., 2000; Leitner et al., 2007.
4 For the following paragraphs, see Maggio, 1998; Schmid, 1998; Uitermark in this volume; Smith, 1996; Kipfer, 1998; Tang, 2009; Eckstein, 2001; Moreira Alves, 2004.
5 See Castells, 1973, Castells et al., 1978, Castells 1983.
6 In many respects, Castells' and Lefebvre's conceptions of the urban and of urban struggle can be understood as representing two competing approaches. Whereas Castells followed a form of structural Marxism derived from the work of Louis Althusser, Lefebvre developed a heterodox and open critical theory inspired by many sources, especially by the German dialectics of Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche and by French phenomenology (see Schmid, 2010).
7 In this context, it is interesting to note that mainstream economic analysis has long neglected this aspect of urban development. It was not until the late 1990s that neo-classical economics rediscovered space and centrality (Fujita et al., 1999).
8 See Schmid and Weiss, 2004. The International Network for Urban Research and Action (INURA) started a collective mapping project which traces the various elements of the new metropolitan mainstream in more than 30 cities. Initial results have been presented at an exhibition in conjunction with the twentieth INURA conference held in Zurich in 2010 (see www.inura.org).
9 The phrase is from Harvey, 1996. See also INURA, 1998; Lehrer and Keil, 2006.

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