

Debates and Developments

The Right to the City

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The city, the noted urban sociologist Robert Park once wrote, is:

man's most consistent and on the whole, his most successful attempt to remake the world he lives in more after his heart's desire. But, if the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself.

The right to the city is not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it after our heart's desire. We need to be sure we can live with our own creations (a problem for every planner, architect and utopian thinker). But the right to remake ourselves by creating a qualitatively different kind of urban sociality is one of the most precious of all human rights. The sheer pace and chaotic forms of urbanization throughout the world have made it hard to reflect on the nature of this task. We have been made and re-made without knowing exactly why, how, wherefore and to what end. How then, can we better exercise this right to the city?

The city has never been a harmonious place, free of confusions, conflicts, violence. Only read the history of the Paris Commune of 1871, see Scorsese's fictional depiction of *The Gangs of New York* in the 1850s, and think how far we have come. But then think of the violence that has divided Belfast, destroyed Beirut and Sarajevo, rocked Bombay, even touched the 'city of angels'. Calmness and civility in urban history are the exception not the rule. The only interesting question is whether outcomes are creative or destructive. Usually they are both: the city is the historical site of creative destruction. Yet the city has also proven a remarkably resilient, enduring and innovative social form.

But whose rights and whose city? The communards of 1871 thought they were right to take back 'their' Paris from the bourgeoisie and imperial lackeys. The monarchists who killed them thought they were right to take back the city in the name of God and private property. Both Catholics and the Protestants thought they were right in Belfast as did Shiv Sena in Bombay when it violently attacked Muslims. Were they not all equally exercising their right to the city? 'Between equal rights', Marx once famously wrote, 'force decides'. So is this what the right to the city is all about? The right to fight for one's heart's desire and liquidate anyone who gets in the way? It seems a far cry from the universality of the UN Declaration on Human Rights. Or is it?

Marx, like Park, held that we change ourselves by changing our world and vice versa. This dialectical relation lies at the root of all human labor. Imagination and desire play their part. What separates the worst of architects from the best of bees, he argued, is that the architect erects a structure in the imagination before materializing it upon the ground. We are, all of us, architects, of a sort. We individually and collectively make the city through our daily actions and our political, intellectual and economic engagements. But, in return, the city makes us. Can I live in Los Angeles without becoming a frustrated motorist?

We can dream and wonder about alternative urban worlds. With enough perseverance and power we can even hope to build them. But utopias these days get

a bad rap because when realized they are often hard to live with. What goes wrong? Do we lack the correct moral and ethical compass to guide our thinking? Could we not construct a socially just city?

But what is social justice? Thrasymachus in Plato's Republic argues that 'each form of government enacts 'the laws with a view to its own advantage' so that 'the just is the same everywhere, the advantage of the stronger'. Plato rejected this in favor of justice as an ideal. A plethora of ideal formulations now exist. We could be egalitarian, utilitarian in the manner of Bentham (the greatest good of the greatest number), contractual in the manner of Rousseau (with his ideals of inalienable rights) or John Rawls, cosmopolitan in the manner of Kant (a wrong to one is a wrong to all), or just plain Hobbesian, insisting that the state (Leviathan) impose justice upon reckless private interests to prevent social life being violent, brutal and short. Some even argue for local ideals of justice, sensitive to cultural differences. We stare frustratedly in the mirror asking; 'which is the most just theory of justice of all?' In practice, we suspect Thrasymachus was right: justice is simply whatever the ruling class wants it to be.

Yet we cannot do without utopian plans and ideals of justice. They are indispensable for motivation and for action. Outrage at injustice and alternative ideas have long animated the quest for social change. We cannot cynically dismiss either. But we can and must contextualize them. All ideals about rights hide suppositions about social processes. Conversely, social processes incorporate certain conceptions of rights. To challenge those rights is to challenge the social process and vice versa. Let me illustrate.

We live in a society in which the inalienable rights to private property and the profit rate trump any other conception of inalienable rights you can think of. This is so because our society is dominated by the accumulation of capital through market exchange. That social process depends upon a juridical construction of individual rights. Defenders argue that this encourages 'bourgeois virtues' of individual responsibility, independence from state interference, equality of opportunity in the market and before the law, rewards for initiative, and an open market place that allows for freedoms of choice. These rights encompass private property in one's own body (to freely sell labor power, to be treated with dignity and respect and to be free from bodily coercions), coupled with freedoms of thought, of expression and of speech. Let us admit it: these derivative rights are appealing. Many of us rely heavily upon them. But we do so much as beggars live off the crumbs from the rich man's table. Let me explain.

To live under capitalism is to accept or submit to that bundle of rights necessary for endless capital accumulation. 'We seek', says President Bush as he goes to war, 'a just peace where repression, resentment and poverty are replaced with the hope of democracy, development, free markets and free trade'. These last two have, he asserts, 'proved their ability to lift whole societies out of poverty'. The United States will deliver this gift of freedom (of the market) to the world whether it likes it or not. But the inalienable rights of private property and the profit rate (earlier also embedded, at US insistence, in the UN declaration) can have negative, even deadly, consequences.

Free markets are not necessarily fair. 'There is', the old saying goes, 'nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequals'. This is what the market does. The rich grow richer and the poor get poorer through the egalitarianism of exchange. No wonder those of wealth and power support such rights. Class divisions widen. Cities become more ghettoized as the rich seal themselves off for protection while the poor become ghettoized by default. And if racial, religious and ethnic divisions cross-cut, as they so often do, with struggles to acquire class and income position, then we quickly find cities divided in the bitter ways we know only too well. Market freedoms inevitably produce monopoly power (as in the media or among developers). Thirty years of neoliberalism teaches us that the freer the market the greater the inequalities and the greater the monopoly power.

Worse still, markets require scarcity to function. If scarcity does not exist then it must be socially created. This is what private property and the profit rate do. The result is much unnecessary deprivation (unemployment, housing shortages, etc.) in the midst

of plenty. Hence, the homeless on our streets and the beggars in the subways. Famines can even occur in the midst of food surpluses.

The liberalization of financial markets has unleashed a storm of speculative powers. A few hedge funds, exercising their inalienable right to make a profit by whatever means rage around the world, speculatively destroying whole economies (such as that of Indonesia and Malaysia). They destroy our cities with their speculations, reanimate them with their donations to the opera and the ballet while, like Kenneth Lay of Enron fame, their CEOs strut the global stage and accumulate massive wealth at the expense of millions. Is it worth the crumbs of derivative rights to live with the likes of Kenneth Lay?

If this is where the inalienable rights of private property and the profit rate lead, then I want none of it. This does not produce cities that match my heart's desire, but worlds of inequality, alienation and injustice. I oppose the endless accumulation of capital and the conception of rights embedded therein. A different right to the city must be asserted.

Those that now have the rights will not surrender them willingly: 'Between equal rights, force decides'. This does not necessarily mean violence (though, sadly, it often comes down to that). But it does mean the mobilization of sufficient power through political organization or in the streets if necessary to change things. But by what strategies do we proceed?

No social order, said Saint-Simon, can change without the lineaments of the new already being latently present within the existing state of things. Revolutions are not total breaks but they do turn things upside down. Derivative rights (like the right to be treated with dignity) should become fundamental and fundamental rights (of private property and the profit rate) should become derivative. Was this not the traditional aim of democratic socialism?

There are, it turns out, contradictions within the capitalist package of rights. These can be exploited. What would have happened to global capitalism and urban life had the UN declaration's clauses on the derivative rights of labor (to a secure job, reasonable living standards and the right to organize) been rigorously enforced?

But new rights can also be defined: like the right to the city which, as I began by saying, is not merely a right of access to what the property speculators and state planners define, but an active right to make the city different, to shape it more in accord with our heart's desire, and to re-make ourselves thereby in a different image.

The creation of a new urban commons, a public sphere of active democratic participation, requires that we roll back that huge wave of privatization that has been the mantra of a destructive neoliberalism. We must imagine a more inclusive, even if continuously fractious, city based not only upon a different ordering of rights but upon different political-economic practices. If our urban world has been imagined and made then it can be re-imagined and re-made. The inalienable right to the city is worth fighting for. 'City air makes one free' it used to be said. The air is a bit polluted now. But it can always be cleaned up.

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