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# Introduction to the special issue « Whose right to the city ? / Le droit à la ville, pour qui? »

Antonin Margier and Lucas Melgaço

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## Introduction

- 1 Today, the 'right to the city' has become a key concept, a motto, not only in academic circles, but also in civil society movements and in public policy. The so-called accessibility of the city for all has become a fundamental concern to institutions dealing with citizens' movements that reclaim urban space. In developing the concept of the right to the city, Lefebvre (1968) referred to a reappropriation of the decision process and the city's production facilities by its inhabitants. In this sense, "the *right to the city* cannot be conceived as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed *right to urban life*" (Lefebvre, 1968: 108). The affirmation and participation of citizens in the future of the city should reduce the gaps between citizens, should limit segregation and foster the emergence of a more inclusive and democratic city.
- 2 Now, more than 40 years after the publication of *The Right to the City*, it is clear that inequalities, conflicts and injustices in public spaces have not declined. An important part of the global urban population, both north and south, continues to be sidelined from urban amenities. Urban production tends to be directed by logics of enclosure and exclusivity (Donzelot, 2004), being fragmented into a multitude of enclaves, hence classifying individuals according to their social status. Some minorities have ever less access to public spaces, whether they are the homeless (Mitchell, 1997; Zeneidi-Henry, 2002), street vendors (Cossa, 2009), prostitutes (Hubbard, 2004) or youth (Malone, 2002). Moreover, the idea of being a citizen has made way for that of being a consumer, as pointed out by Santos (1987).

- 3 In order to critically address these phenomena, many researchers have mobilized the concept of the right to the city, either in a more orthodox way or by diverting, distorting, or adapting it to local contexts. Furthermore, many politicians have used the term as a slogan, legitimizing practices often distant from the Lefebvrian ideal (Costes, 2010; Souza, 2010; Attoh, 2011). Since its emergence, this concept has acquired varying meanings as a result of its flexibility and the many possible interpretations. This has gradually reduced its clarity and analytical power. Even more so because the quest for the right to the city often becomes a pretext for bypassing those considered a burden to the urban experience. Indeed, as soon as certain groups start defending their right to the city, they come into conflict with the right of other groups to occupy the urban space. If the right to the city is often mobilized from a critical perspective by researchers, its use by citizens often evokes rights only guaranteed to the dominant groups.
- 4 By launching this call, we had the ambition to clarify these ambiguities in relation to the right to the city and see how researchers today seize, divert or even reject the concept. In this regard, the authors of this issue are not only concerned with Lefebvre's approach, but also with updating his concept of the right to the city and in testing it in light of the complexity of the contemporary urban realm. By emphasizing the notion of class, Lefebvre tended to treat the urban citizen as a member of the working class (Purcell, 2002), which may reduce the diversity of the urban population and the importance of issues related to gender, racism, age, which are fundamental to everyone's accessibility to the city. It is this "class bias" (ibid.), often referred to as a limitation, that the diversity of urban identities studied in this issue aims to overcome. The variety of actors (beggars, young people, elderly women, graffiti artists, etc.), the different domains (from social work studies to geography), and the different scales of analysis (from the street to urban plans) demonstrate, however, the strength and analytical power of the right to the city.

## 1. The right to the city and the affirmation of a desire for recognition

- 5 Several articles of this thematic issue bring to light the fundamental tension that hides behind the right to the city. This is particularly true with regard to minority or marginalized groups for whom the appropriation of public space is a way to exist and to integrate the 'public.' In this regard, Annamaria Colombo, Caroline Raynaud and Giada de Coulon's article shows how management policies may lead to the criminalization of begging in Geneva. By confronting the justifications for these policies with beggars' discourses on their own practices, this article shows that beyond a simple survival strategy, begging in public space also reflects a desire for recognition. These practices mean a reappropriation of the sociospatial margins that allow these people to not only survive but to also reaffirm their identity in the city. In a different manner, the youth groups which Mattias de Backer studied in Brussels invest in public space as a way for them to guarantee their place in the city. Often constrained by standards of behaviour in public spaces that do not correspond to their common practices, these young people must take ownership, mark and 'parochialise' public spaces so they can impose their own standards and fully express themselves. In face of ever more stringent and exclusive control structures, these practices can be considered as tactics (De Certeau, 1990), as forms of resistance for these groups willing to claim their place in the city. Much like the appropriation of public spaces by beggars or youth groups, according to Andrzej

Zieleniec, graffiti also shows “the unsanctioned intervention of those who are relatively powerless”. By seeing graffiti through the lenses of the theories of social and relational production of space, the author understands this practice as a creative way to engage with the city, as a will to produce and practice space, “to be represented in and by space” and therefore to assert graffiti makers’ right to the city.

- 6 However, the desire to be part of the ‘public’ often raises unease and tensions among other groups who consider practices like graffiti to be disrespectful. As Mattias De Backer asserted: “in order to be truly social, young people as well as other undesirables need to be asocial”. At the same time that these minorities proclaim their right to the city, they paradoxically experience the strengthening of measures of control and surveillance directed to them. The emergence in Geneva of measures that criminalize the act of begging, as described by Colombo et al., is a prime example. This tension between social control and the desire for recognition appears at the heart of the paradoxical dimension of the right to the city and raises many questions. How do you allow everyone to claim their place in the city without restricting the space of the other? How do you reconcile the coexistence of different groups with the ethical requirement of a collective right to the city? Do marginalized groups actually have the means to benefit from the right to the city or is the idea of a ‘city for all’ ultimately an unattainable illusion?

## 2. Is the right to the city a discourse that obscures other relations of domination?

- 7 These questions are especially relevant as some claims for the right to the city gain more echo and legitimacy than others depending on the groups concerned, their capacity to mobilize the media, and their degree of institutionalization. The emergence of the citizen movement *PicNic the Streets*, in Brussels, studied by Julie Tessuto is an iconic example. Centralized around a relatively homogeneous group of Dutch speaking middle class Belgians, this movement has been organizing disobedient picnics in central public spaces of the city. *PicNic the Streets* brought environmental issues and the need to focus on pedestrians in the city center to public debate. However, the author shows that the visibility of this movement may reduce the importance of other socio-economic transformations of the city center, transformations that are accelerated by the introduction of a pedestrian area in the center of the Belgian capital. By claiming the right to a pedestrian area, this mobilization tends to “depoliticize urban planning issues”, reduce the social impact of certain urban interventions and limit the reaffirmation of other less organized groups. Her article thus underlines the political limits of the concept of the right to the city. The mobilization of this concept can reproduce, in an embellished form, issues of domination. This finding invites us to thoroughly analyse the claims and citizen mobilizations to be able to clearly understand the diversity of their motivations and goals. This requirement is all the more necessary to avoid freezing the right to the city and turning it into a totally meaningless signifier without any actual use to understand the urban realm.

### 3. The right to the city and the risk of simplifying urban issues

- 8 To grasp the full reality of the right to the city, it is necessary to analyze it not only in relation to class but considering all parameters. By focusing on elderly women's coastal promenades in Bretagne, France, Raymonde Mathilde and Bigo Séchet show how the right to the city is related to age. But they reveal especially that the difficulties faced by older women to access and appropriate these spaces increase or decrease depending on gender and physical fitness, to which economic, cultural and relational aspects are added. Making use of a detailed survey of the constraints and their articulations, they warn against non-critical analyses of the right to the city "in the unveiling of the effects of the capitalist economy and in the only consideration of social relations class". This way the authors invite us to embrace the right to the city in all its complexity.
- 9 This micro-geographical approach is also addressed by René Hoenderdos in the article about the use of and social interactions in a park in a residential Johannesburg suburb. In the different ways they use the park, a multitude of citizens socially engage with each other and build a sense of belonging to the neighbourhood. Although the appropriations of the park may differ and practices vary across social groups (residents, youth, domestic), the author shows that users of the park manage to negotiate their presence and their differences. Yet, it is precisely through the recognition – albeit implicitly – of the other, of the difference, that a mutual trust and a sense of community is formed in this area. Although these social relations correspond more to a "tolerated multiplicity" (Amin, 2008) than to true inclusion, this example highlights the importance of everyone's free access to public spaces in the construction of the right to the city (Mitchell, 2003).
- 10 Several of the articles in this issue bring forward these micropractices behind exclusion and inclusion phenomena. In this perspective, Vanessa Becciu discusses the Euroméditerranée project, a vast operation of urban renewal in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> arrondissements of Marseille. By focusing on the trajectories of displaced persons, she reveals the criteria by which displacement is imposed upon certain people and how they experience it. This geo-sociological approach allows her to show that these movements do not only mean a spatial exclusion from downtown Marseille but they also reflect an exclusion from the political and cultural spheres of the city. From a different perspective, Julie Gangneux Kebe shows how land pressures over urban space change people's ability to "make city" (Agier, 2009). In the Hafia neighbourhood in Conakry, Guinea, public spaces are a crucial element of the urban social cohesion. Public areas, which are collectively appropriated, in a permanent, temporary or exceptional way by family, social or commercial events, have a real social function. They constitute local communities through which spaces in the neighbourhood are negotiated and moulded. However, the gradual privatization of these places and their constant closure severely limit the implementation of these practices, although they are the founders of social ties and of living together in this neighbourhood. By reducing the offer of public areas, such privatization reduces inhabitants' ability to form urban cohesion in (and through) these common areas. In a context in which the state shows no involvement in urban planning – or when they do, with a mere focus towards private interests –, privatization and the closure of public areas can have considerable effects on the functioning of a neighbourhood, in terms of participation of the inhabitants.

- 11 The articles in this issue show the importance of the concept of the right to the city to the extent that it engages researchers, practitioners and civil society around urban issues. The flexibility of this concept and its frequent assimilation by different actors foster the democratic debate and encourage citizen participation. By its heuristic value, the right to the city leads to a multitude of reflections that consider the underprivileged and all those who are normally not considered by the public discourse. Yet, it is precisely this success and trivialisation of the concept that constitutes a limitation when it comes to understanding whom this right addresses. Hence, whose right to the city? These articles show that it is difficult to answer this question, if only because the right to the city comes in as many visions as there are groups that claim it. There are multiple interests before such a right, interests that are not always compatible. Moreover, in spite of being more than ever necessary to promote the development of democratic practices within the urban, the right to the city must be treated with caution. The mobilization of this right by urban policies and by citizens may serve the reproduction of the existent social and urban order more than the development of modalities that may challenge such an order. This issue highlights how complicated is to implement the concept of right to the city for a truly inclusive and collective ownership of the city. This limitation seems to lie in the fact that this concept is often related to a city totally liberated from tensions and frictions. Public space, however, is inherently contested. The city is built on managing these tensions rather than eliminating them.
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