



## Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant

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*Key words:* cities, citizenship, democracy, globalization, governance

### Abstract

Much current activism and scholarship has raised concern that the various processes of neoliberal restructuring are threatening democracy. More specifically, researchers in geography and other social sciences have stressed that political and economic restructuring in cities is negatively affecting the enfranchisement of urban residents. Much recent research and writing has explored progressive responses to this perceived disenfranchisement in cities. One popular trend has been a fascination with the idea of the 'right to the city' as a way to respond to neoliberal urbanism and better empower urban dwellers. I argue that the right to the city holds promise, but that in the literature the idea remains both theoretically and politically underdeveloped. It remains unclear (1) what the right to the city entails or (2) how it might address current problems of disenfranchisement. This paper examines the right to the city in greater depth. It does so by offering a close reading and analysis of the intellectual roots of the idea: the writings of Henri Lefebvre. I suggest that Lefebvre's right to the city is more radical, more problematic, and more indeterminate than the current literature makes it seem. The paper concludes by suggesting that the right to the city does offer distinct potential for resisting current threats to urban enfranchisement. However, the right to the city is not a panacea. It must be seen not as a completed solution to current problems, but as an opening to a new urban politics, what I call an urban politics of the inhabitant.

### Introduction

In December of 1999 during the anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle, the Rainforest Action Network hung an enormous banner from a construction crane that read: Democracy → ← WTO.

Extending this argument beyond the WTO, demonstrators and activists in Seattle, Washington D.C., Montreal, Goteborg, Genoa, Porto Allegre, and other places have insisted that a central problem of neoliberal global restructuring is that it is disenfranchising democratic citizens. Control is being transferred, they argue, from citizens and their elected governments to transnational corporations and unelected transnational organizations. Activists identify large corporations, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and various other institutions as the architects of a neoliberal project that pursues a specific form of globalization: the increasing functional integration of all people and places into a single, *laissez-faire*, and capitalist world economy. Opponents of this form of globalization fear that the growing power of capital and its pursuit of neoliberalization will increasingly disenfranchise the mass of people, excluding them from the decisions that determine the course of globalization. A range of scholars in geography, urban studies, political economy, and elsewhere echo this fear; they argue that the current round of global

restructuring has increased disenfranchisement, encouraged authoritarianism, and imperiled democracy (e.g. Falk, 2000; Held, 1995; Swyngedouw, 2000).

That more general argument about democracy and globalization has been adapted to the urban context by geographers and other social scientists. They have developed a compelling body of theoretical and empirical work that examines the relationship between political- economic restructuring and urban governance. They argue that (1) the current round of political- economic restructuring has involved extensive changes in the institutions of urban governance (Brenner, 1999; Jessop, 1997; MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999), and (2) those governance changes have tended to disenfranchise urban inhabitants with respect to the decisions that shape the city (Peck, 1998; Tickell and Peck, 1996; Ward, 2000). Although these changes have been complex and have led to a range of outcomes, the literature argues that overall they have tended to decrease the control urban residents have over the decisions that shape their city. Therefore, this work argues that there is a continuing need for research and action that can devise new strategies for resisting neoliberal globalization and for enfranchising urban inhabitants.

Among those who have explored potential responses to disenfranchisement, the idea of 'the right to the city' has received considerable attention (Friedmann, 1995; Isin, 2000; Rights to the city, 1998, 2002; Soja, 2000). However, for

the most part this work has not systematically elaborated just what the right to the city entails, nor has it carefully evaluated the consequences the idea would have for empowering urban residents. The right to the city is frequently discussed, but it is rarely engaged in depth (exceptions are Dikec, 2001; Purcell, in press). In some ways, the 'right to the city' has become something of a catchphrase; its potential for contributing to a renewed urban democracy has yet to be critically examined. The purpose of this paper is not to advocate for the right to the city, but to critically examine it. My goal is to (1) articulate a detailed statement of just what Lefebvre's right to the city entails, and (2) examine some of the consequences it would have for urban democracy in the face of neoliberal restructuring<sup>1</sup>. The paper pursues these goals by returning to Lefebvre's writings and engaging in a detailed exposition and evaluation of his idea (Lefebvre, 1968, 1973, 1996). I argue that Lefebvre is a good starting place for a more detailed and critical analysis of the right to the city and its utility for urban democracy. My analysis suggests that Lefebvre's right to the city offers a much more radical, more problematic, and more open-ended vision of urban politics than the vision currently offered in the literature. Lefebvre does not offer a completed and self-contained alternative to current urban enfranchisement structures. Instead, he imagines and advocates a new urban politics, what I call an urban politics of the inhabitant. That new urban politics is entirely contingent: it may have desirable or undesirable outcomes for the social and spatial structure of the city. The right to the city offers an approach that at once is exciting and disconcerting. It is exciting because it offers a radical alternative that directly challenges and rethinks the current structure of both capitalism and liberal-democratic citizenship. It is disconcerting because we cannot know what kind of a city these new urban politics will produce. They could play out as a truly democratic challenge to marginalization and oppression, but they could also work to reinscribe new forms of domination. It is important to think carefully and critically about the right to the city, because realizing it would not mean the completion of a new urban revolution; rather, it would mark its beginning.

### **The problem: global restructuring and declining enfranchisement in cities**

The recent popularity of the right to the city idea is partly a result of a growing concern in geography and other social sciences about the hypothesized decline of democracy and enfranchisement in cities. The work on questions of democracy, citizenship, and globalization is large and diverse. I am unable in this paper to examine the right to the city against all aspects of this literature<sup>2</sup>. I focus here on the arguments being developed by political economists in geography, who have argued that the post-1970 round of global restructuring has involved specific changes in the way cities are governed (Goodwin and Painter, 1996; Jones, 1999). It suggests that governance is being reconfigured in three main ways: (1) it is being rescaled, (2) policy is being reoriented away from redistribution and toward competition,

and (3) many state functions are being transferred to non-state and quasi-state bodies. This last change is referred to as a shift from government to governance. The three changes have provoked concern that urban inhabitants are becoming increasingly disenfranchised, specifically with respect to the control they exert over the decisions that shape the geography of the city (Brodie, 2000).

### *Rescaling*

Researchers argue that governance is being rescaled such that institutions at sub- and supranational scales are taking on greater powers. There have been moves to create new governing institutions at the supra-national scales, such as the European Union, the World Trade Organization, or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. The sub-national aspect of rescaling involves local institutions accepting more responsibility and authority as nation-states devolve control from the national scale to the local and regional scales. This devolution means that local governing institutions are increasingly responsible for duties such as economic development, social services, the provision of infrastructure, and spatial planning (Painter, 1995; Staeheli *et al.*, 1997). In this context, governance institutions in cities have taken on greater authority and responsibility to make policy for urban areas. They are less beholden to governing institutions at larger scales, particularly national-scale states.

### *Policy reorientation*

The increased autonomy of local governance institutions has been accompanied by a shift in their policy orientation. The main shift has been toward competition: in the context of neoliberal restructuring, local governance institutions have placed increasing emphasis on maintaining their region's economic competitiveness (Harvey, 1989; Peck, 1998; Swyngedouw, 1996). In the past, local governance was associated more with administering national-scale redistribution schemes designed to stimulate consumer demand and support a national economy based on mass production and mass consumption (Amin, 1994). Since economic restructuring has made the local economy increasingly less a function of the national economy, local governments have become more concerned with ensuring that the local area competes effectively in the global economy. No longer do local leaders feel they can rely on national policy makers to advocate for the economic fortunes of their locality. Therefore, the literature argues, economic development and competitiveness have become the primary imperative that drives local policy-making. Local places increasingly engage in supply-side intervention designed to attract investment to the local area: they assist technology transfer to stimulate high-tech growth, they take a greater role in planning and funding infrastructure improvements, and they offer job retraining designed to provide a flexible labor force for the new economy (Leitner, 1990; Painter, 1995; Peck and Jones, 1995).

## Governance

In moving away from demand-oriented redistribution and toward supply-oriented competition, local government has begun to seek greater efficiency by reorganizing its overall structure. It has begun to contract out services to volunteer organizations and private firms, and it has developed quasi-public bodies – such as ‘quangos’, training and enterprise councils, urban development corporations, and public-private partnerships – to carry out many of the functions of local government (Krumholz, 1999; Payne and Skelcher, 1997; Walzer and York, 1998). In order to ensure the local area is more competitive in the global economy, the local state has ‘outsourced’ some functions so that it can reconfigure itself to become more like a flexible firm. It has developed ‘*an emphasis on customer care; leaner, flatter managerial hierarchies; budgetary devolution; multiskilling and flexibility of the workforce; a key role for information and information technology; and the adoption of new managerial ideologies*’ (Hoggett, 1987; Painter, 1995, p. 282). Overall, the argument is that a shift from local government to local governance is underway; in its effort to compete for increasingly mobile investment capital, the local state (government) has transferred many of its powers and duties to complex networks of new state, quasi-state, and non-state institutions (governance) (Hay and Jessop, 1995; Painter and Goodwin, 1995; Ward, 2000). The result has been a much more complex and rapidly evolving set of institutions that govern urban areas. In the main, scholars worry that the new governance ethos is driven particularly by the imperative of capitalist accumulation. It eschews democratic deliberation as inefficient and inappropriate for present economic circumstances. Moreover, the new governance institutions are increasingly outside the local state, meaning more governing decisions are being made by actors not directly accountable to the local electorate and conventional democratic control. The fear, in short, is that these new institutions and their new policy imperatives exclude local inhabitants from the decisions that shape their cities. Overall, research on globalization and urban governance change has declared an urgent need for new strategies to counteract the growing disenfranchisement of urban inhabitants.

Investigation into such strategies has begun, and much of it has involved empirical examinations of new movements among marginalized urban populations who advocate some form of renewed democratic control (e.g., Keil, 1998; Pulido, 2000). Among those academics who are searching for an alternative to neoliberal disenfranchisement, many have begun to explore ‘the right to the city’ as a promising possibility (Holston, 1999; Holston and Appadurai, 1999; Isin, 1996, 2000; Isin and Wood, 1999; Rights to the city, 1998, 2002; Sandercock, 1998; Sassen, 2000; Smith, 1993; Soja, 1996, 2000). Beyond academia, the term is also gaining greater attention. To name just a few examples, it is evoked in conflicts over housing (Grant Building Tenants Association, 2001; Olds, 1998) against patriarchal cities (City & Shelter *et al.*, no date; United Nations Center for Human Settlements, 2001), for participatory planning (Daniel, 2001), and against social exclusion in cities more generally

(Buroni, 1998; Cities for human rights, 1998; Worldwide Conference on the Right to Cities free from discrimination and inequality, 2002).

Unfortunately, however, few in or out of academia have offered a detailed exposition of just what the right to the city would entail, and they have not developed what benefits or detriments it might have for the enfranchisement of urban residents. To be clear, this work is innovative, stimulating, and welcome. However, it falls short of a careful exposition and evaluation of the right to the city idea. We lack a comprehensive explanation of what the right to the city is or how it would challenge, compliment, or replace current rights. And we are left without a good sense of how the right to the city might address the specific enfranchisement problems associated with urban neoliberalism. A great gulf exists between the frequency with which the right to the city is mentioned and the depth with which it is explored. My fear is that if we offer only latent evocation, the concept will appear amorphous and unhelpful, and it will fall into disuse without having been critically evaluated. In an effort to give the right to the city its day in court, so to speak, the next section returns to Lefebvre’s writing on the subject. In doing so I am certainly not suggesting that an orthodox Lefebvrian formulation is the only acceptable approach to the right to the city, or that we need an orthodox conception at all. Rather I return to Lefebvre’s initial idea as a logical place to begin to articulate one version of a more explicit and thorough delineation of what the right to the city would entail. I then explore some of the many implications of Lefebvre’s idea for social and political relations in cities and evaluate its potential for resisting the anti-democratic trends of neoliberal urbanization outlined above.

## The solution: The right to the city?

Lefebvre’s notion of the right to the city is at once complex and fluid. What I offer is not so much a meticulous restatement of Lefebvre’s arguments as it is an extrapolation of those arguments. I offer a set of principles that grow out of a close reading of Lefebvre’s writing. In doing so, I draw primarily on three of Lefebvre’s works, *The right to the city*, *Space and politics*, and *The production of space* (Lefebvre, 1968, 1973, 1991, 1996)<sup>3</sup>. I suggest that Lefebvre’s right to the city is an argument for profoundly reworking both the social relations of capitalism and the current structure of liberal-democratic citizenship. His right to the city is not a suggestion for reform, nor does it envision a fragmented, tactical, or piecemeal resistance. His idea is instead a call for a radical restructuring of social, political, and economic relations, both in the city and beyond. Key to this radical nature is that the right to the city reframes the arena of decision-making in cities: it reorients decision-making away from the state and toward the production of urban space. Instead of democratic deliberation being limited to just state decisions, Lefebvre imagines it to apply to *all* decisions that contribute to the production of urban space. The right to the city stresses the need to restructure the power relations that underlie the production of urban space, fundamentally shifting

control away from capital and the state and toward urban inhabitants.

Since urban space figures so centrally in the right to the city, it is important to say a word about Lefebvre's notion of space. He takes an extremely expansive view that encompasses much more than just concrete space. Lefebvre's idea of space includes what he calls perceived space, conceived space, and lived space (Lefebvre, 1991). Perceived space refers to the relatively objective, concrete space people encounter in their daily environment. Conceived space refers to mental constructions of space, creative ideas about and representations of space. Lived space is the complex combination of perceived and conceived space. It represents a person's actual experience of space in everyday life. Lived space is not just a passive stage on which social life unfolds, but represents a constituent element of social life (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39; Soja, 1996). Therefore, social relations and lived space are inescapably hinged together in everyday life. Producing urban space, for Lefebvre, necessarily involves reproducing the social relations that are bound up in it. The production of urban space therefore entails much more than just planning the material space of the city; it involves producing and reproducing all aspects of urban life. For Lefebvre (1996, p. 158), then, "the *right to the city* is like a cry and a demand... a transformed and renewed *right to urban life*."

This stress on the production of urban space separates the right to the city clearly from present forms of enfranchisement in liberal democracies. Present forms of enfranchisement revolve predominantly around the structures, policies, and decisions of the formal state. Liberal-democratic citizens (whose formal citizenship status is based on their nationality) have an institutionalized voice in the decisions of the state, and they therefore have some indirect control over any social process the state can influence. By contrast, the right to the city enfranchises people with respect to all decisions that produce urban space. That simple change radically expands the scope of enfranchisement beyond the state structure. Many of the decisions that produce urban space are made within the state, but many more of them are made outside it. The investment decisions of firms, for example, would fall within the purview of the right to the city because such decisions play a critical role in producing urban space. Conventional enfranchisement does give citizens some influence over the decisions made by capital, but that control is diffuse and partial since the state can only influence the *context* in which capital is invested (through tax policy, labor law, environmental restrictions, etc.); it can't control such decisions directly. The right to the city, conversely, would give urban inhabitants a literal seat at the corporate table, because it gives them a direct voice in any decision that contributes to the production of urban space. It would transcend the state-bound limitations of current structures of conventional citizen enfranchisement.

It is important to be clear about exactly who is enfranchised under the right to the city. Presently, formal enfranchisement is largely based on national citizenship. Those who are national citizens are eligible to participate in various aspects state decision-making. In Lefebvre's con-

ception, however, enfranchisement is for those who *inhabit the city*. Because the right to the city revolves around the production of urban space, it is those who live in the city – who contribute to the body of urban lived experience and lived space – who can legitimately claim the right to the city. The right to the city is designed to further the interests 'of the whole society and firstly of all those who *inhabit*' (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 158). Whereas conventional enfranchisement empowers national *citizens*, the right to the city empowers urban *inhabitants*. Under the right to the city, membership in the community of enfranchised people is not an accident of nationality or ethnicity or birth; rather it is earned by living out the routines of everyday life in the space of the city. Because throughout the twentieth century the term 'citizenship' has been hegemonically associated with membership in a national political community, those who have a right to the city are perhaps better termed what Lefebvre calls *citadins* instead of citizens. In using that term, Lefebvre fuses the notion of citizen with that of denizen/inhabitant. He argues that the right to the city

*should modify, concretize and make more practical the rights of the citizen as an urban dweller (citadin) and user of multiple services. It would affirm, on the one hand, the right of users to make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in the urban area; it would also cover the right to the use of the center, a privileged place, instead of being dispersed and stuck into ghettos (for workers, immigrants, the 'marginal' and even for the 'privileged')* (1991 # 2342, translated in Kofman and Lebas, 1996, p. 34).

The right to the city involves two principal rights for urban inhabitants: the right to participation, and the right to appropriation. The right to participation maintains that *citadins* should play a central role in any decision that contributes to the production of urban space. The decision could be under the auspices of the state (such as a policy decision), of capital (an investment/disinvestment decision), a multilateral institution (a WTO trade ruling), or any other entity that affects the production of space in a particular city. Moreover, the decision could be made at a range of scales. It could involve any level of the state (national, provincial, local), or corporations that operate at any scale (global, national, local). For example, *citadins* who have a right to Seattle would have the right to participate centrally in an investment decision of a corporation like Boeing (now headquartered in Chicago) that would affect urban space in Seattle. Lefebvre is clear that the decision-making role of *citadins* must be *central*, but he is not explicit about what that centrality would mean. Lefebvre does not clearly say that decisions that produce urban space should be made *entirely* by inhabitants. But it is clear that the role inhabitants play must be central and direct. Unlike the indirect nature of liberal-democratic enfranchisement in which the voice of citizens is filtered through the institutions of the state, the right to the city would see inhabitants contribute directly to all decisions that produce urban space in their city.

Lefebvre gives some idea of what he sees as the agenda of *citadins* in making decisions that produce urban space.

That agenda is embedded in the second aspect of the right to the city, the right to appropriation. Appropriation includes the right of inhabitants to physically access, occupy, and use urban space, and so this notion has been the primary focus of those who advocate the right of people to be physically present in the space of the city (Capron, 2002; Isin and Wood, 1999; Lamb, 2002; Salmon, 2001; Mitchell and Staeheli, 2002). However, Lefebvre imagines appropriation to have a much broader and more structural meaning. Not only is appropriation the right to occupy already-produced urban space, it is also the right to produce urban space so that it meets the needs of inhabitants. Because appropriation gives inhabitants the right to ‘full and complete usage’ of urban space in the course of everyday life (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 179), space must be produced in a way that makes that full and complete usage possible. The use value aspect of urban space must therefore be the primary consideration in decisions that produce urban space. The conception of urban space as private property, as a commodity to be valorized (or used to valorize other commodities) by the capitalist production process, is specifically what the right to appropriation stands against.

Taken together, Lefebvre’s vision of the right to the city is therefore one of radical transformation of urban social and spatial relations. It would transform both current liberal-democratic citizenship relations and capitalist social relations. First, the dominant model of citizenship is entirely upended by the right to participation. Lefebvre’s idea entails much more than simply returning to or enlarging the established liberal-democratic citizenship structures in the face of governance change. Rather urban inhabitation directly confronts national citizenship as the dominant basis for political membership. Because citizens of Vietnam, Mexico, and the United States can all equally be inhabitants of a particular city, inhabitants must have a right to participation regardless of nationality. Therefore, the right to participation rejects the Westphalian notion that all political loyalties must be hierarchically subordinate to one’s nation-state membership (Hettne, 2000; Krasner, 2000). It proposes a political identity (inhabitation) that is both independent of and prior to nationality with respect to the decisions that produce urban space. Moreover, as we saw above, the right to participation opens up decisions beyond the state. Unlike conventional enfranchisement, the right to participation expands the decision-making reach of inhabitants to all decisions that produce urban space. Lastly, the right to participation insists that inhabitants participate centrally and directly in decision-making. In place of the current regime in which capital and state elites control the decisions that produce urban space, Lefebvre imagines inhabitants as the majority and hegemonic voice.

The right to appropriation, for its part, constitutes an explicit and direct challenge to the social relations of capitalism. Over the past two centuries, the valorization of urban space has been a key accumulation strategy for capital (Castells, 1977; Harvey, 1981) and property rights have given capitalist firms relatively free reign to produce urban space to maximize its exchange value. The right to appropriation

confronts capital’s ability to valorize urban space, establishing a clear priority for the use value of urban residents over the exchange value interests of capitalist firms. In addition, appropriation reworks control over urban space, resisting the current hegemony of property rights and stressing the primacy of the use-rights of inhabitants. Challenging property rights, of course, means challenging the foundation of capitalist class relations. When coupled with a central role for inhabitants in decision-making, appropriation poses a direct challenge to a set of political-economic relationships that have been critical to the valorization of urban space and the accumulation of capital in the modern era.

The radical way the right to the city challenges the established structures of both conventional liberal citizenship and capitalism suggests it holds particular promise for resisting the disenfranchisement associated with urban neoliberalism. However, this promise must be tempered by two significant concerns: (1) Lefebvre’s right to the city raises more questions than it answers, and (2) this indeterminate character leaves open the possibility that the right to the city could have significant negative impacts on cities. In other words, Lefebvre’s urban politics of the inhabitant would not lead necessarily to any particular outcomes. In order to give a sense of the political openness the right to city would entail, in the next section I develop some aspects of the contingent politics of scale that the right to the city would initiate.

### Scalar politics and the right to the city

Pursuing an urban politics of the inhabitant in political practice will necessarily involve, among other politics, a multi-faceted politics of scale. These politics will involve the scalar structure of participation, and the scalar definition of political membership. Recent writing in geography about scale argues clearly that scalar politics are contingent – their outcomes depend on the agendas of the political actors who prevail. That is because scale is not an objective reality; rather it is socially produced through a process of political struggle (Agnew, 1997; Brenner, 2001; Marston, 2000; Smith, 1993). Therefore, whether new scalar arrangements are progressive or regressive cannot be predicted *a priori*. In the case of the right to the city, a contingent politics of scale will help determine who is empowered (and who is not), and it will shape what those powers will be. The right to the city is not inherently liberatory, despite Lefebvre’s clear intentions. He argues that urban inhabitants should be empowered, but both the degree of that empowerment (how much control?) and its character (are all inhabitants empowered equally?) will be struggled over. Those who are empowered by these politics will determine the specific social and spatial outcomes the right to the city will have. I argue that these scalar politics will have two main aspects: a rescaling of the present structure of democratic participation, and a rescaling of how political membership is defined.

*Rescaling the present structure of democratic participation*

The right to the city implies an extensive rescaling of the arrangements that presently characterize democratic participation. In liberal democracies participation structures are linked tightly to formal citizenship in the nation-state; formal citizens have some institutionalized say in the decisions the state will take. Because their participation is linked to *state* decisions and policies, citizens' participation is scaled in a very particular way. Citizens inhabit a fairly rigid series of nested scales that constrain their participation. In the U.S., for example, citizens are typically enfranchised in a municipal government, a county government, a state government, and the federal government and their participation is limited to these nested scales. That is, they do not have a formal say in municipalities, counties, states, and nation-states other than their own. Moreover, the scales they inhabit are arranged in a hierarchical relationship. The national scale is hegemonic, meaning they must be a citizen of the nation-state in order to be enfranchised at the other scales. In addition, in a federal system, each scale is partly subject to the decisions of state bodies at larger scales. Thus citizens who voted for a successful county ballot measure might see their choice overturned by decisions at the state or national scale.

Because the right to the city revolves so strongly around the production of urban space, the scalar arrangement of participation it implies would be profoundly more complex, overlapping, and malleable than the current structure. Lefebvre argues that inhabitants have the right to participate centrally in the decisions that produce urban space. Those decisions operate at a range of different scales in a range of different territories. Consider, for example, a hypothetical decision by the Mexican government to alter land-tenure policy in the state of Oaxaca. Current enfranchisement structures would allow Oaxacan citizens, and to an extent all Mexican citizens, to have some (limited) say in the decision. However, land reform in Oaxaca can strongly affect immigration from Oaxaca to Los Angeles (among other places) and has in the past. Such a decision would likely contribute to the production of urban space in Los Angeles by changing its population geography. Therefore, under the right to the city, inhabitants in Los Angeles would have a right to participate centrally in the Mexican government's decision. Such a right explodes the relatively neat, nested scalar hierarchy that currently characterizes democratic enfranchisement and its Westphalian assumptions. In this example, it extends the reach of Los Angeles citizens beyond the borders of Los Angeles, California, and the United States and into both Mexico City and rural Mexico. It grants Angeleno *citadins* a seat at the table in Oaxaca and in Mexico City. It upends the current nested hierarchy with a complicated vision of overlapping and reconfigured scales, such that these hierarchies are no longer hegemonic in structuring participation. As this example demonstrates, the right to the city implies radical transformations in the structures of political power. These transformations open up countless contingencies. It is therefore very difficult to predict whether the right to the city will lead to desirable outcomes. In the Oaxaca example, one

obvious negative outcome that might result is that wealthy, white *citadins* in Los Angeles will work to exclude non-white, poorer Oaxacans from the city. On the other hand, in another context, inhabitants in Ciudad Juarez might use the same power toward different ends. Since they would have a say in the investment decisions of TNCs wanting to locate in the city, they might use their right to participation to prevent the arrival of an American chemical company that would dump benzene into the Rio Grande, thereby resisting environmental injustice along the U.S.-Mexico boundary. It is therefore the agenda of those empowered that will determine the social and spatial outcomes of the right to the city and its politics of scale.

In addition to such larger-scale politics, developing an urban politics of the inhabitant would also involve negotiating relationships at smaller scales, such as between the urban scale and its sub-scales. A central question would be whether the urban scale, once established under the right to the city, would obliterate its sub-scales such all inhabitants had entirely equal rights to participation in the processes that produce urban space. We can safely extrapolate from Lefebvre that all urban inhabitants would be entitled to participate equally on large-scale processes that affect the entire urbanized region. For example, if a very large company like Boeing were to decide to move aerospace production out of Seattle, it would greatly affect the economic geography of the entire urbanized region, and all Seattle inhabitants would clearly have a right to participate centrally in such a decision. However, it remains unclear how to cope with decisions that have more localized impacts on sub-urban scales. A mundane example would be the decision between building a mini-mall or a community center on a vacant lot in a particular neighborhood. Assuming both would be used primarily by neighborhood residents and the impacts would be borne by them as well, do those who live in the neighborhood have a *greater* right to participate centrally than those who live outside the neighborhood but within the city? Clearly the decision would produce urban space, and so all residents of the city have some right to participate. But would those rights be differentiated at sub-urban scales, so that neighborhood residents would have a greater say in the decision? And if so, how would the scalar impact of each issue and its associated rights allocation be determined? In the most negative case, if rights are differentiated at sub-urban scales, it is easy to see how wealthy neighborhoods could use their expanded authority to block low-income housing in their area and reinforce residential segregation. Other cases are less clear, such as a decision about a particular station on a region-wide commuter-rail system. Clearly the station would have specific neighborhood impacts, but the site and characteristics of the station (e.g., where it is located and if it is above-ground or below) affect the transportation geography of the entire region. In such cases, the questions of who can participate and to what degree are more complex, and they are strongly contingent on the outcome of political struggle.

### *Rescaling the definition of political membership*

As I have argued, Lefebvre is very keen to define urban inhabitation as the key to political inclusion; he argued that those who inhabit the city have a right to the city. This criterion constitutes an alternative way of imagining the scalar definitions of political community. The current hegemonic notion of political membership is Westphalian, wherein membership is defined by one's national citizenship. Under this dominant scheme, membership in political communities at other scales – urban, regional, or global – are subordinated to membership in the national community. The principle of inhabitation, conversely, imagines a scalar arrangement in which the urban is the hegemonic scale at which political community is defined. Under the right to the city, other scales of community are subordinate to the urban-scale community of inhabitants. One might still be part of a national community, but since one can equally inhabit the city regardless of nationality, urban inhabitation must come first in defining political community. The right to the city would thus advocate an alternative set of scalar interrelationships, arguing for an urban-hegemonic vision of political membership in addition to a national-hegemonic one (see Figure 1).

Rescaling political community in this way may be more possible now than in the past. Many scholars have recently advanced the argument that the hegemony of national-scale political and economic organization is becoming unstable as a result of global political-economic change. They suggest that new forms of citizenship, political membership, and identity are proliferating, especially in core areas of the world economy such as Europe and North America (Linklater, 1998; Ong, 1999; Soysal, 1999; Yuval-Davis, 1999). They argue that nation-state citizenship and national identity is no longer as dominant a frame for political life as they once were. The right to the city would both benefit from and add to that climate of scalar instability. Nevertheless, such a radical reimagining of the scalar relationships that frame political membership would involve conflict. The relationship between the current scalar structure and that imagined by the right to the city would have to be negotiated through political struggle. Would the right to the city be fully independent from nationality? Partly independent? In what way? Although for Lefebvre the right to the city is entirely independent of nationality, in practice the two identities would likely have to be negotiated in a compromise arrangement. This relationship would be made still more complex by relationships with the many other, non-national political identities (based on gender, ethnicity, environment, etc.) that are currently growing in importance (Jelin, 2000; Rocco, 1998; Yuval-Davis, 1997).

The struggle over which scale is dominant in determining political inclusion is important because that scale delineates the inside and the outside of political membership. This argument is precisely the one Neil Smith makes with respect to the national scale, arguing that under the Westphalian model of political membership national-scale territories distinguish inside from outside – they separate 'us' from 'them' (Smith, 1995). Despite the recent work that suggests the decline of

the national scale as the scale at which this distinction is made, in the United States, the aftermath of the attacks of September 11 has made it very clear that the national scale is still a very powerful force in distinguishing between 'us' and 'them' (as well as, absurdly, between 'good' and 'evil'). The right to the city introduces an entirely different scalar arrangement for making this distinction. The 'us' of the right to the city is those who inhabit the city; its 'them' is those who inhabit other places. One undetermined element of that formulation is the definition of 'the city.' If the urban scale becomes the predominant scale that differentiates inside from outside, its parameters will have to be defined. The politics of scale literature makes clear that scales (such as the urban) are not pre-given or self-evident; rather they are socially produced through political struggle. Therefore, in order to define the geography of the political community that is bound together by the right to the city, and in order to define who is entitled to its rights and who is not, the urban scale will have to be defined through a process of struggle. Lefebvre is of little help here. He is stubbornly vague about how to define 'the city.' For example, clearly 'Los Angeles' would involve more than just the municipal jurisdiction. The limits to the city would likely extend to the urbanized area of the city. But how extensive would these limits be? Would residents of Tijuana be considered residents of Los Angeles? According to what criteria? Clearly places in Seattle's Puget Sound urbanized area would be included in 'Seattle,' but what about Vancouver? Or Portland? Would these be separate cities, or considered all part of one 'Cascadian' metropolis? Also important would be the issue of what we might call 'transurban' inhabitants. Can one inhabit more than one city? If so, do those people have full rights to both cities? Or partial rights, since they could be judged to inhabit less completely than most? As with all politics of scale, the struggle to define the urban scale and its inhabitants would be contingent; its actual impact on enfranchisement and the production of urban space cannot be assumed. While defining political membership at a smaller scale gives urban inhabitants greater control over the space of their city, it also encourages them to be more insular in their political worldview. On the one hand they are more fully empowered, on the other hand that empowerment can tempt them to withdraw from their responsibilities to national, continental, or global political communities. Such potential for insularity certainly raises the question of just how democratic the right to the city would be.

### **Conclusion**

The need for greater democracy in cities is clear, and it is almost as clear that the recent round of global restructuring has made this need more acute. The growing amount of attention to the right to the city seems to suggest that there is something there, that it can offer real solutions to the problems of enfranchisement in cities. However, the current literature has only scratched the surface of the idea. It fails to examine the idea in depth and so offers very little insight

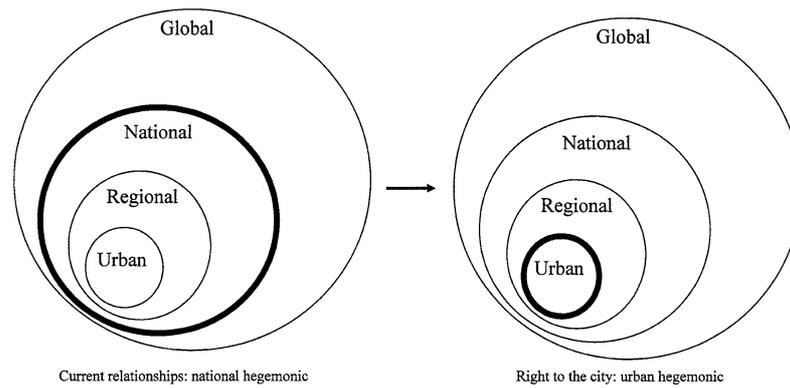


Figure 1. Alternative scalar relationships for defining political membership.

as to if and how it might be mobilized to reverse the growing threat to urban democracy. A close reading of Lefebvre suggests that his right to the city *does* offer real promise as a way of responding to the problem of urban disenfranchisement. An important source of the current problem is the growing power of capital and the increasing inadequacy of liberal-democratic political structures as a means to check that power. Lefebvre's right to the city resists the power of capital both directly and by offering radical alternatives to liberal-democratic structures. However, the promise of the right to the city must be tempered by important and unanswerable questions about what social and spatial outcomes the right to the city would have. Because it is not a completed political architecture but a door to a new and contingent urban politics, the right to the city cannot be evaluated *a priori*. Rather its effect on the social and spatial structure of cities will be determined through and complex and contingent politics, what could best be termed an urban politics of the inhabitant.

I have argued that one important part of these politics will be a multifaceted politics of scale. Although I cannot analyze it fully in this paper, also central to an urban politics of the inhabitant will be a variegated politics of identity and of difference. To my mind, the key weakness in Lefebvre's concept is that he conflates his idea of 'inhabitant' with the category 'working class.' He argues that the right to the city must be realized by a 'social force' that brings about a 'radical metamorphosis' in society (1996, p. 156) and that 'only the working class can become the agent, the social carrier or support of this [social force]' (1996, p. 158). If inhabitants are imagined to be essentially equivalent to the working class, then their agenda becomes reduced to anti-capitalist resistance. They must challenge the *capitalist* city rather than challenge, for example, the racist city, the patriarchal city, or the heteronormative city, all of which confront inhabitants in their daily lives. But it is precisely the analytical and political power of the idea of inhabitance that it opens up the definition of the political subject to include a range of different identities and political interests. One's class and race and gender and sexuality are all fundamental to inhabiting the city. The struggles of inhabitants against marginalization are struggles against an array of social and spatial structures of which capitalism is only one. The concept of inhabitant is not limited to a single social category – it can incorporate

these diverse identities and interests because it is defined by everyday experience in lived space. More research is clearly needed to understand better how politics of identity and difference will articulate with an urban politics of the inhabitant.

So the agenda that inhabitants will pursue cannot be presumed; rather it must be negotiated through a complex politics of scale, identity, and difference, among other struggles. The right to participation means that inhabitants will play a central role in the decisions that produce urban space. What inhabitants will *do* with that decision-making power remains undetermined. They may pursue the production of urban space to meet the needs of inhabitants, but what those needs *are* will be determined through negotiation and political struggle. Inhabitants may pursue the use value of urban space, but they may not necessarily pursue a Marxist notion of use value in contradistinction to exchange value. They may instead think about appropriation as the right of women to equal access and safe movement in urban space. They may resist the spatial concentration of non-white inhabitants in areas of economic disinvestment. They may produce urban space to resist the heteronormative marginalization of gay men and lesbians. More likely they will pursue a complex combination of these and other political projects. Because a range of political identities will define urban inhabitants, a range of political interests may animate their agenda. The result is likely to be the pursuit of heterogeneous and hybrid urban geographies, all of which nevertheless share in common a city produced to meet the complex and multiple needs of urban inhabitants.

The right to the city would make these politics possible, but it is the undetermined *outcome* of these politics that will result in either greater urban democracy or new forms of political domination. This indeterminacy and potential for undesirable outcomes has gone unchallenged in the bulk of the literature on the right to the city because of a pervasive and uncritical assumption that rights are inherently positive. I mean for this paper to go beyond this assumption, by opening up a sustained critical engagement with the right to the city. My representation of Lefebvre's right to the city is not the only way to read his idea, nor is a Lefebvrian right to the city the only possible form the idea can take. Moreover, the right to the city alone is certainly not sufficient for building a more radical and just urban democracy. Lefebvre's class

bias, for example, means that other perspectives are needed to construct a more complete vision of urban democracy. More work is needed to understand how Lefebvre might articulate with other views of radical democracy and citizenship, such as those of Iris Marion Young, Nancy Fraser, Chantal Mouffe, and Nira Yuval-Davis, among others (e.g., Fraser, 1997; Mouffe, 1992; Young, 1990; Yuval-Davis, 1999). Such perspectives, for their part, tend to lack Lefebvre's deeply geographical vision, and so there seems to be great potential in a fusion of the various perspectives. My hope is that this paper can serve as a starting point for a sustained and more explicit debate on what the right to the city should entail and on what it might contribute to greater urban democracy.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>It is important to be clear that I do not present the right to the city as the only or the best strategy for renewing urban democracy. The paper's mission is not to critically evaluate the right to the city against other approaches to radical democracy. Rather it is more specifically to explore the right to the city as one radical-democratic option that is currently popular in geography but remains underdeveloped.

<sup>2</sup>I have, for example, grappled elsewhere with the questions of how the right to the city articulates with changing forms of citizenship (Purcell, in press).

<sup>3</sup>My reading of Lefebvre has been in both French and English. It relies more on the English than on the French. In Lefebvre (1996) there is a full translation of *Le droit à la ville* and a translation of most of *Espace et politique*. Where the French is untranslated, of course, I have relied entirely on the French.

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