article

The right to the city: the struggle for democracy in the urban public realm

Mark Purcell (mpurcell@uw.edu), University of Washington, USA

This paper aims to contribute to contemporary debates on governance change in the local public realm by undertaking a close analysis of Henri Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city. I argue that when it is fully appreciated, Lefebvre's idea imagines a thoroughgoing transformation of the city as a political community. It involves a radical democratization of cities, which Lefebvre understands to mean an ongoing and collective struggle by urban inhabitants to manage the city for themselves, without the state and without capitalism.

Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to contemporary debates on governance change in the local public realm by undertaking a close analysis of Henri Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city. Over the last 20 years or so the local public realm has been a subject of much scholarly attention in critical urban studies. In particular, much has been made of the ongoing reconfiguration of governance at the local scale. I argue that this work has produced a rich store of critical analyses that make clear the problems with the shift from a Keynesian, welfare–state model of governance to a neoliberal, *laissez-faire* model. We have learned at length about the drawbacks of devolution, privatization, retrenchment, fragmentation, and now austerity. Despite the evident strength of this work, it has done less to propose positive alternatives to the current situation. We have a scarcity of ideas about how we might intervene to change the local public realm and its governance, about what kind of city and political community we want to create instead. And so this paper focuses on how we might respond creatively to generate positive alternatives to neoliberal governance in cities. There are of course many different ways to approach such a project. In what follows, I propose a path that brings together the tradition of radical democracy with Lefebvre's conception of the right to the city. I argue that when it is fully appreciated, Lefebvre's idea imagines a thoroughgoing transformation of the city as a political community. It involves a radical democratization of cities, which Lefebvre understands to mean an ongoing and collective struggle by urban inhabitants to manage the city for themselves, without the state and without capitalism. As such, the right to the city is a political project that not only challenges a neoliberal model of governance, but more generally it also urges us to chart a path to a radically different urban society beyond both the state and capitalism.

The changing face of governance

There is a wealth of scholarship in critical urban studies and geography that analyzes the ongoing reconfiguration of urban governance and the local public realm. It does so against the background of the wider political–economic shift in cities in the global North from Keynesianism to neoliberalism over the last 40 years. The argument is that we have moved away from a Keynesian regime of significant central–state intervention in the economy, strong union power, high rates of taxation, a measure of material redistribution through policy, and a relatively large national welfare state apparatus and toward a neoliberal regime of minimal state regulation of capitalist markets, lower rates of taxation, decreased union power, privatization of public assets, and retrenchment of welfare provision (Harvey, 2005; Hackworth, 2006; Purcell, 2008; Geddes, 2011). At the local and urban scale, the manifestations of this wider process have been uneven and complex. There has been increased inter-local competition for economic investment so that local authorities feel they have no choice but to create a 'business friendly' climate (Lauria, 1997; Peck and Tickell, 2002; Brenner and Theodore, 2003; Mayer, 2007). As a result, the extent to which exchange value and property rights drive urban policy and development has been intensified. For local authorities, maintaining economic growth and meeting the needs of capital increasingly take precedence over the wellbeing and provision of services for local inhabitants (Staeheli, Kodras et al, 1997; MacLeod, 2002). Moreover, government does not merely get out of the way of capital by taking a *laissez-faire* approach, it also actively intervenes on behalf of capital, taking what has been called an *aidez-faire* approach to urban policy (Purcell, 2008, 18–22).

Not only has policy been reoriented toward capital accumulation, but the state/public sector has also been reorganized. Functions formerly carried out by government are increasingly outsourced to a complex mix of public, private, and nonprofit entities, many of which have been created only very recently to serve specific purposes. This last trend has been called a shift from government to governance (Peck, 1998; Jones, 1999; Jessop, 2002; Brenner, 2005; Bevir, 2011). In addition to making the political landscape extremely complicated and difficult to navigate, the shift to governance has also prompted concern that citizens are increasingly excluded from decision making as the liberal-democratic state outsources more and more of its authority to make decisions (Swyngedouw, 2005; Stoker, 2010; Somerville, 2011).

The most recent chapter of this story is the recent full-force return of 'austerity', a package of policies designed to eliminate sovereign debt and (putatively) stimulate economic growth by greatly reducing public sector payrolls, selling off publicly owned assets, reducing spending on public benefits, and raising taxes. Clearly this latest wave of neoliberalization is a searching attempt to invent a stabilizing response to the deep crisis induced by the financial collapse of 2007–8. While austerity is widely accepted among elites, it has been met by an extraordinary outburst of deep popular indignation in cities all over Europe and North America. At this point, in 2012, it is very much unclear if this latest manifestation of neoliberal logic can sustain itself in the long run.

So at present we have a voluminous and extremely detailed critical analysis of neoliberalism and governance change in cities. There are many excellent scholars involved, and they have relentlessly tracked each subtle shift in neoliberal hegemony over the course of the last 20 years or so. The critique of this process is extremely well developed. But what this large literature has not done very much of is to imagine an

alternative. It has not trained its considerable talents on answering the question of what is to be done, on imagining and discovering a city beyond neoliberalism and indeed beyond capitalism. I argue that we need urgently to turn to this task, and so the remainder of the paper is an effort to draw on Lefebvre's writing to develop a way that we can imagine creative alternatives to neoliberalization and new ways to think about how we might move beyond the state and capitalism and govern ourselves in the urban public realm.

Real democracy

While Lefebvre's right to the city forms the core of how I think about those new alternatives, taking his idea seriously necessitates a shift in our idea of what *democracy* means, and so I want to begin by articulating how we might think democracy differently. Democracy is of course a term that has many meanings, so many that some find it lacks any meaning at all. But I think if we are clear about how we use the term, democracy still has a wealth of political potential in thinking about the city beyond neoliberalism. To understand democracy in a way that helps lead us into Lefebvre's vision, we have to understand it to mean much more than the dominant idea of democracy: rules and institutions for making decisions as they exist in contemporary liberal democratic states. There, democracy's rule of the people is mitigated greatly by a whole array of mediating structures: parties, elections, legal systems, governing institutions, and the state form in general. The dominant common sense, in short, tends to equate democracy with liberal democracy. However, in truth the liberal democratic state is an institution in which a relatively few people are selected, separated out from the population, and designated to govern the whole. It is therefore a governing structure in which the few rule the rest. This arrangement is more properly understood as an oligarchy, rather than a democracy. And in fact we could make a more general claim here. All modern states are oligarchies. They are, in the very intention of their constitution, the very thing Hobbes (1996) said they are: a political arrangement in which people surrender their own power to an entity outside themselves, and that entity uses their own power to rule them. Everyone alienates their own power to a few – a cadre of governing officials – and those few hold legitimate power over the many. Liberal democracy gives people a voice in choosing who the rulers will be, but that doesn't change the fact that its fundamental structure of rule is the same as in all states: it is oligarchy.

To be sure, the manifestations of this structural oligarchy can be relatively more or less democratic, and those differences are not unimportant. Liberal–democratic states are certainly more desirable than autocratic ones. However, a radical understanding of democracy insists that we cannot be satisfied with the soft oligarchy of liberal democracy. It urges us to struggle for something more, for *real* democracy. Thinking democracy radically in this way has important implications for the contemporary moment: it helps us remember that whatever the benefits of returning to a Keynesian welfare state, however much good it might achieve by comparison with our current neoliberal regime, the welfare state is nevertheless an unapologetically strong–state alternative. It is therefore not a particularly *democratic* alternative to neoliberalism. Radical democracy reminds us that even though the welfare state is the alternative most near at hand and the one we know best, it is nevertheless an oligarchy. We are capable of much more. We are capable of democracy.

So then what does democracy mean? We could start with something like this: democracy is a mode of living together in which people manage *for themselves* the conditions of their own existence. In democracy people are autonomous rather than heteronomous, meaning literally that people 'give themselves the law' rather than having the 'law given to them by another'[1]. In a democracy, people rule themselves; they are not ruled by others. Ruling oneself is an active project, it is never a passive state of rest. Democracy and autonomy imply an ongoing struggle to actively govern oneself that takes tremendous effort to maintain. Heteronomy, the desire to let someone else do it, must be continually warded off. Therefore, in order to be autonomous, people must also be intensely aware, alive, and active.

One predictable objection to this way of thinking about democracy is a practical one: it is impossible for all the people, everyone together, to govern themselves directly. And it is impossible for each person to maintain the continuous and active struggle that democratic autonomy requires. This objection holds more than an element of truth, and in response we might revise the original idea: democracy is not a state of being or an ideal political community at the end of history. It is not something we hope to achieve in concrete form. Drawing on Lefebvre's arguments in *The urban revolution* (2003b), we can think of democracy instead as a horizon that we can travel towards but that we never reach, because a horizon always recedes. At the same time, a horizon is something that proposes a distinct direction for us to move in. Seeing democracy as a horizon thus involves setting ourselves on a path toward a not–entirely–distinct destination that we will never reach. In a similar way, we can take inspiration from Deleuze and Guattari (1987), and think not democracy as a state of being but as a process of becoming. We should not think of ourselves as *being democratic* but in terms of *becoming democratic*. We never achieve democracy, we can never be democratic, we can only ever continually become democratic, we must always struggle to manage our affairs for ourselves as much as we can.

This struggle to become democratic requires also that people struggle to become autonomous and become active, that they continually refuse heteronomy and passivity. Becoming democratic means to continually cease being the political spectator and continually become the political actor. Clearly this process would involve a heroic personal struggle within each person as he or she refuses the temptation to be passive. Such individual struggle is absolutely necessary. But democracy also requires us to go beyond the personal, the individual. We must also engage in a *collective* struggle to become democratic together. We must endeavor to rule ourselves in a community. So it is necessary to consider carefully what kinds of political relations are appropriate to that community, what kinds of communities we should be trying to create. Of course this is an enormous question, and a full treatment of it is beyond the scope of this paper. But let me offer just an outline of a way forward.

In various forms of radical political theory[2], as well as in the explosion of popular struggles throughout 2011, there has been much interest in experimenting with leaderless groups whose members engage each other in horizontal, non-hierarchical relations. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) use the imagery of rhizomes: centerless assemblages in which any point or individual can connect to any other. They also articulate the idea of the 'body without organs', which is a collective that is able to operate effectively without specialized centers of organization. Such collectives try to avoid developing institutionalized centers dedicated to carrying out specific tasks (for example planning, infrastructure, rule making, etc.). Such centers would

introduce relations of oligarchy into the group, because they would specialize in a certain function, and so they would render the rest of the group passive and ruled with respect to that function. What Deleuze and Guattari are proposing, essentially, is a body (politic) without (party) organs.

Such organ-less bodies would need to develop some form of emergent intelligence or consciousness in order to act effectively. Here Deleuze and Guattari turn to models from the nonhuman world. A wolf pack, a flock of starlings, and a beehive are all made up of a multitude of individuals that can act quite effectively as a mass without any centralized leadership. Of course this move will be countered by an objection to its naturalism, a claim that humans don't slavishly follow the pack because they have free will. This was precisely how Hobbes responded to the problem of the spontaneous order that even in his day had been observed in beehives. Humans have free will, he argued, and that free will must be disciplined by a powerful central authority in order to maintain the peace (Hobbes, 1996, see especially Chapter XVII).

But Hardt and Negri (2004, 337) upend Hobbes' argument by showing that our free will is itself illusory, that according to contemporary neuroscience the human brain itself functions as a rhizome. Our 'free will' relies on a centerless network of neurons that coordinate themselves through emergent organization every time we make a decision[3]. At a larger scale, it was clear at certain moments in 2011 the crowds in Tahrir Square in Cairo, Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Syntagma Square in Athens, or Zuccotti Park in New York City operated very much in this way as well. They were collections of individuals with no organized leadership that nevertheless *knew what to do* in order to take and hold the square against the police. And in addition to those instances of spontaneous coordination, people also experimented consciously with leaderless and horizontal organization throughout these actions, as for example with the popular general assemblies and committees.

As is true of becoming democratic more generally, we should not expect to achieve this kind emergent, leaderless organization as a stable end state. Rather, in pursuing the project of becoming democratic, we should think of ourselves as striving to ward off the formation of leadership and specialized institutions of organization. What becoming democratic means is to commit ourselves to an ongoing, collective struggle to become leaderless and horizontal, to become starling and wolf, to become Sol and Syntagma. To return, over and over again, to Tahrir Square.

Henri Lefebvre and the right to the city

I turn now to a consideration of how this idea of democracy links up with Lefebvre's right to the city. To understand his idea it is helpful to have some background. Henri Lefebvre was an intellectual in the French tradition, which is to say he is difficult to place in any disciplinary category. His work is philosophy, politics, sociology, anthropology, and geography all at once. It ranges widely over a variety of topics, including studies of rural society, radical philosophy, the politics of everyday life, state theory, and urban studies. Lefebvre's work is inspired by many different thinkers, including Hegel, Heidegger, Lenin, and Nietzsche, but it is probably Marx that made the deepest imprint on his thought (Elden, 2004). It is therefore probably most apt to call Lefebvre a Marxist thinker, but he is more than just that, and in no way was he orthodox or dogmatic about his Marxism.

Despite this topical and intellectual breadth, Lefebvre's work is drawn together by a deep commitment to a project of the radical transformation of society. As a Marxist, even a heterodox one, he understood radical transformation to mean a move to a society beyond capitalism. It is accurate to say that he understood that society to be socialist (and perhaps even communist), but we should never confuse Lefebvre's socialism with the actually existing socialism in societies like the Soviet Union or China. Lefebvre lived through the Stalinist era, and he was deeply critical of the totalitarian state socialism that came to dominate the period[4]. Moreover, as a member of the French Communist Party, Lefebvre struggled against its dominant Stalinist faction, and that struggle eventually led to his leaving the party in the late 1950s. So Lefebvre's idea of socialism is emphatically not a fixed template for an ideal society. Instead, it is an open project that carries us in a particular direction, toward a horizon beyond the present society. It is a kind of becoming socialist.

The right to the city and the new contract

The right to the city is one of Lefebvre's better known concepts. Over the last 10 years or so, there has been quite a lot of attention paid to the concept across a range of scholarly, policy, and activist circles. Some have understood the idea as part of a broader United Nations-HABITAT agenda, as a human right to the city that must be guaranteed by member states (for example UN-HABITAT, 2010). In academia, the idea has been much discussed as well (Purcell, 2002; Mitchell, 2003; Brenner, Marcuse et al, 2011, among others), though all too often it is evoked without being carefully examined (for example Friedmann, 1995; Harvey, 2003; 2008). To date, most of this work has failed to apprehend the full power of Lefebvre's idea. I think a major reason for that failure is that few take the time to situate the right to the city in the context of Lefebvre's wider political vision. I argue that when we do that, we are able to see the right to the city as just one element of Lefebvre's wider project to move beyond capitalism and the state and toward the horizon of democracy. And so here I try to deepen and extend the insights of the literature surrounding the right to the city by situating the idea in Lefebvre's wider political vision.

In 1990, very near the end of his life, Lefebvre proposed something he called a 'new contract of citizenship', which he presented as the core of his political vision for the future (original, 1990; translation, 2003a). He enumerates a suite of new rights to be included in the new contract, such as the right to difference, the right to information, the right to autogestion, and the right to the city. On its surface, the contract could easily be interpreted as something like an addendum to the Bill of Rights, something that fits firmly within the well known tradition of liberal-democratic rights. But this conception of rights, as formal juridical rights guaranteed by the liberal-democratic state, is not at all Lefebvre's understanding of rights. His new contract of citizenship aims at something much more politically revolutionary, a change that cannot in any sense be contained within the traditional idea of rights as legal protections offered by the liberal-democratic state.

Lefebvre does not intend the new contract of citizenship to be a political end goal. He does not think that once we are granted the rights in the contract we will have achieved our goal of a better society. For Lefebvre a right is not an end goal that we reach when the state inscribes it into law. Instead, for him a right is a beginning. It is a political opening statement, a point of departure from which we begin a generalized

struggle for a thoroughgoing renewal of political life. For Lefebvre, when people claim the rights in the contract they are not appealing to a liberal–democratic state for concessions. Instead, he thinks of a right as 'a cry and a demand' (1996, 158). People claiming a right are rousing themselves, they are touching off a political awakening, they are shaking off a torpor. For Lefebvre the new contract is a way for people to begin to become active, to struggle to take control over the conditions of their existence, and to begin to manage those conditions for themselves. Their political awakening prompts them to discover and come to reappropriate their own power, power that has been expropriated by the state and by capitalist institutions. Lefebvre uses the term 'autogestion' to signify this struggle whereby people actively take up the project of managing their own affairs for themselves. Typically translated as 'self-management', the word has a much richer meaning that originally refers to the many examples throughout history of workers appropriating a factory and managing it themselves[5]. Lefebvre develops the idea of autogestion most fully in the collected volume *State, space, world* (2009), where he argues for generalizing the idea beyond the factory and into all institutions and spheres of human life[6].

In many ways the concept of autogestion holds the key for understanding Lefebvre's wider political project. Lefebvre's political writing works very closely with Marx and Lenin, and he retains much of their terminology and concepts. He insists that we must hold fast to the idea of a dictatorship of the proletariat through which the overwhelming majority of society comes to control the decisions that determine that society. "Today, as a Marxist," he declares, "I FULLY RECOGNIZE the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat" (2009, 87). However, prompted by his critique of Stalinism, Lefebvre is adamant that this dictatorship cannot be imposed by a vanguard party that has seized the state. Rather it must emerge spontaneously from below. For that reason, even though he retains the term, he is talking less about dictatorship and more about something like the emergent power of the proletariat. As the power of the majority comes to pervade society and the oligarchy of property owners and state officials fades, society undergoes what he calls a deepening of democracy. In addition, as the mass of people come to realize their own power, as they demonstrate to themselves that they are capable of managing their own affairs, the state apparatus begins to appear increasingly less necessary, and it progressively withers away. Similarly, as people come to realize their own capacity for managing material production, capitalist social relations of exploitation and domination also progressively wither away. This agenda – including the dictatorship of the proletariat, the deepening of democracy, and the withering away of the state – is absolutely non-negotiable for Lefebvre (2009, 91). Of course this agenda stands in stark contrast to any politics that demands more rights guaranteed by the liberal–democratic state. He agrees with Marx and Saint-Simon: "the accomplishment of democracy is the end of the State" (2009, 81)[7].

To reiterate, Lefebvre does not see this project of widespread collective self-management as an end goal but rather as a perpetual struggle. Moreover, he sees this struggle as largely the same thing as democracy, a democracy quite similar to the 'real democracy' I articulate above. "Autogestion must continually be enacted," he says in a 1979 essay, and "the same is true of democracy, which is never a 'condition' but a struggle" (2009, 135). For Lefebvre the struggle for autogestion is the struggle for democracy. In an earlier piece (1964), Lefebvre reiterates that idea:

Democracy is nothing other than the struggle for democracy. The struggle for democracy is the movement itself. Many democrats imagine that democracy is a type of stable condition toward which we can tend, toward which we must tend. No. Democracy is the movement. And the movement is the forces in action. And democracy is the struggle for democracy, which is to say the very movement of social forces; it is a permanent struggle and it is even a struggle against the State that emerges from democracy. There is no democracy without a struggle against the democratic State itself, which tends to consolidate itself as a block, to affirm itself as a whole, become monolithic and to smother the society out of which it develops (2009, 61).

Autogestion and democracy are always constituted by a movement toward a horizon, an ongoing project for people to increasingly manage their affairs for themselves.

The city and space

So then what role does the right to the city play in Lefebvre's wider project of democracy and autogestion? Recall that the right to the city exists as part of Lefebvre's new contract of citizenship. We know that the *right* in right to the city is not a liberal-democratic one but a starting point for a democratic awakening. To understand the importance of the *city* for Lefebvre, his book *The urban revolution* is key (original, 1970; translation, 2003b). In that book Lefebvre distinguishes between what he calls the 'industrial city' and 'urban society'. The industrial city doesn't mean the historical industrial city of Fordist factory production. Rather he means the capitalist city as he inhabited it in 1970, a city in which private property and exchange value are the dominant ways to organize urban space, in which the dominant sociospatial processes separate and segregate people from one another, and those separated parts are homogenized and made equivalent so they can be exchanged on the market. Urban inhabitants in the industrial city are politically passive, and they function primarily as consumers rather than citizens. These inactive inhabitants are warehoused in sterilized urban spaces he calls 'habitat'. This city is an engine for ensuring economic growth through the production of standardized commodities. It is an oligarchy, managed by an elite few state and corporate administrators. Today we would call this the neoliberal city. Lefebvre's contemporary Guy Debord (1983) called it *The society of the spectacle*.

Lefebvre contrasts industrial city with 'urban society'. In urban society urban space is not ruled by property rights and exchange value but by inhabitants who appropriate space, make it their own, and use it to meet their needs. Urban society draws inhabitants into the center, into vital urban spaces where they encounter each other and engage in collective and meaningful negotiations about what kind of city they desire. These encounters build a shared sense of common purpose and solidarity among inhabitants. But the encounters also make inhabitants aware of the substantive differences among them, and they are forced to confront and manage these differences together. This effective engagement with others is what Lefebvre calls *l'inhabiter*, an active and fecund life-in-space he contrasts with the sterile space of habitat[8]. The connections inhabitants make with others nourish their creative potential and encourage them to create *oeuvres*, which for Lefebvre are unique works rather than standardized commodities. In urban society, the purpose of the city is the development of human potential[9] rather than capitalist accumulation. Urban

society is, in short, a city in which urban inhabitants manage the space of the city for themselves. It is urban autogestion, or urban democracy. Following a growing trend, we might even venture to call it urban communism (for example Hardt and Negri, 2000; Ranciere, 2003; Badiou, 2008; The Invisible Committee, 2009; Douzinas and Zizek, 2010; Badiou, 2011).

In the above description, urban society may appear to be an ideal, a socialist utopia imagined out of the ether. But Lefebvre is adamant that it is not. Urban society can "be defined not as an accomplished reality… but, on the contrary, as a horizon, an illuminating virtuality. It is the possible, defined by a direction, that moves toward [urban society] as the culmination of its journey" (2003b, 16–17). His meaning here requires a bit of unpacking. Urban society is 'virtual' because it is not yet fully actualized. It is a possible society, one that is inchoate, emerging, in the process of becoming. But urban society is nevertheless real; it is operating right now, in the present. Lefebvre says that we can see glimpses of this emerging urban society in the midst of the industrial city. They are fleeting and incipient, but they are still concrete practices undertaken by real inhabitants, practices of encounter, of appropriation, of spatial autogestion. Our practical political project, for Lefebvre, must be to *extrapolate these fledgling practices in thought*. Through a method he calls 'transduction', we begin by closely examining actual-but-inchoate practices that are currently taking place in the city, and then we extrapolate them using theoretical reflection to produce, in thought, a more fully developed version of them, a virtual idea (which he calls 'urban society') that shows us what kind of world they would produce if they were allowed to flourish and pervade the city. Once we have extrapolated this concept in thought, we then use it as a lens to help us better see those actual practices as they exist today, struggling to emerge and flourish. We need this lens, he says, because the fledgling urban society is difficult to see in the blinding light of the industrial city (1996, 148). If we can develop urban society in thought, it will help us perceive, for example, meaningful connections among inhabitants amid prevailing separation and segregation; or active citizens amid passive consumers; or *l'inhabiter* amid habitat; or democracy amid oligarchy; or urban autogestion amid the neoliberal city. Using urban society as an intellectual and political tool, we will be better equipped to move toward a new horizon, toward a possible world, toward urban autogestion and democracy. Urban society is

> an ongoing social practice, an urban practice in the process of formation… this practice is currently veiled and disjointed… it possesses only fragments of a reality and a science that are still in the future. It is our job to demonstrate that such an approach has an outcome, that there are solutions to the current problematic (2003b, 17).

The right to the city then, as one element of the new contract of citizenship, is a claim whose purpose is to initiate the political struggle that moves us towards the horizon of urban society. It is for Lefebvre a revolutionary declaration: as urban inhabitants we reject the property rights and exchange value of the industrial city, and we affirm our own power and ability to manage the production of urban space for ourselves. In making this declaration, urban inhabitants are not speaking so much to those currently in power; they are speaking more to themselves. They are telling themselves that they intend to begin this struggle for autogestion and urban society, the struggle to become

active, become autonomous, and become democratic. Even though the declaration is revolutionary, the concrete practice that follows from it is entirely realistic. It is a practice we can begin today and continue into the future. What we must do is to seek out and learn to see the emerging elements of urban society that already exist. When we discover them, we must learn how to help them grow and spread on their own terms. This is almost precisely the project Italo Calvino proposed two years later in *Invisible cities* (1972). To escape suffering the inferno, Marco Polo tells Kublai Khan, we must "seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, and help them endure, give them space" (1993, 164, my translation).

Conclusion

So Lefebvre's political method of transduction – by which we pay close attention to actual practices of urban autogestion, extrapolate them in thought, and use the resulting concept to better see even more actual practices – this method directly addresses the question of *how* we might follow Calvino's injunction to "seek and learn to recognize" the not-inferno. It is a way that we can both ground ourselves in the realities of the current society and yet still refuse to accept the existing boundaries of that society. Even though transduction starts from what is actual, Lefebvre decries the 'short-term realism' of a political pragmatism that assumes systemic change can never happen (Lefebvre, 2003b, 75). We must never remain contained within the actual, he says, we must always move toward the virtual, that which has not yet been actualized. However, Lefebvre also rejects the fanatical utopias of idle dreamers. Claiming the right to the city and moving toward urban society does *not* entail a project to achieve a purely democratic, stateless, post-capitalist ideal city at the end of history. Lefebvre is emphatic on that point: he says we must reject 'abstract utopianism' because it offers an unrealizable no-place that does not begin from and is not attentive to our current situation (2003b, 75). In short, transduction rejects both hard-eyed pragmatism and starry-eyed utopianism. It steps back from what exists in order to go beyond it, but it also affirms that urban society and democracy are already here, struggling to emerge.

When we put this methodology into practice, we see the contemporary city with new eyes. We begin to see a city in which there is more at work than just the relentless deepening of neoliberal hegemony, more happening than the continual extension of market relations into every sphere of social life. Through transduction we see all sorts of popular actions that resonate with the right to the city and with urban society. When we decide to seek out that activity, we find people everywhere struggling to become active and to manage their own affairs for themselves. This activity, this struggle to become democratic, is so pervasive that an exhaustive cataloging would take volumes. It manifests in greater and lesser intensities, but each is significant in its own way, in its own context. There is the spectacular autogestion of Tiananmen or Tahrir Square, but there is autogestion even in the most autocratic and bleak of urban societies. Lefebvre urges us to seek urban society wherever we are, to find it and nourish it in whatever condition it exists. With that injunction in mind, let me just try to illustrate how our practice might look by sketching a few examples that are particularly clear in their connection to autogestion and urban society.

In Argentina in 2001, people all over the country, and especially in the cities, responded to a deep economic and political crisis by developing their own forms of organization. They created popular neighborhood assemblies as a way to try to govern

themselves without the party and the state. They also occupied and 'recuperated' local factories that had been abandoned by capital, and started operating them on their own (Adamovsky, 2003). In the process they came to realize their own power, to understand that they were far more capable governors and managers than they ever thought they could be (Colombo and Mascarenhas, 2003). The legacy of those struggles was taken up explicitly in Spain in May 2011 when the so-called *indignados* from multiple sectors of the Spanish population occupied central urban squares in Madrid, Barcelona, and elsewhere. They came to express their indignation that global financial interests and their facilitators in the Spanish government were proposing harsh austerity policies that asked the Spanish people to bear the costs of an economic crisis caused by the actions of the financial interests themselves. Their cries of "*que se vayan todos*"[10], which were a direct quotation of what the Argentinians had shouted in 2001, expressed a conviction that many in the square shared: appealing to the state is no longer a viable option, it is very much part of a diseased political-economic structure prone to crisis and suffering[11]. Instead they called for "Real democracy now," not as something to be granted by the state, but as something they intended to begin building themselves. And so once they were gathered together in the square, many *indignados* began to manifest their own versions of the Argentine popular assemblies as a way to discover how to organize themselves and begin to take up management of their own affairs.

Of course the Spanish Revolution in 2011 was not just inspired by Argentina, but also by the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia several months before, and by concurrent uprisings in Greece. For their part, many Greeks also insisted on the political values of democratic self-management. The first declaration issued by the People's Assembly of Syntagma Square (2011) read, in part:

> For a long time decisions have been made for us, without consulting us. We… have come to Syntagma Square… because we know that the solutions to our problems can only be provided by us. We call all residents of Athens… and all of society to fill the public squares and to take their lives into their own hands. In these public squares we will shape our claims and our demands together.

The Spanish and Greeks in turn directly influenced the emergence of the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States several months later. Again, these are particularly spectacular examples. I offer them to give a concrete sense of popular activity that echoes the political and ethical values of the right to the city – people managing their own affairs for themselves, without the state and without capital. Example that are less spectacular and more mundane are no less important or useful as an inspiration for future action. When we view the world through the lens of the right to the city and urban society, we begin to see innumerable manifestations of the popular desire for something more, for a different city and society in which people struggle to govern themselves. These examples are just the tip of the iceberg. I am sure the reader can easily think of many more such examples from his or her own context. And that is the political method Lefebvre offers us: the purpose of concepts like the right to the city, urban society, autogestion, and democracy is to *be able to better perceive* the manifestations of popular self-management that exist all around us. The popular assemblies in Argentina, Spain, Egypt, or Greece that turned away from the state and capitalism and explored how people might govern their city and their

affairs for themselves – these are just some of many examples. They are all around us. We can use the method of transduction to search for them and to know them when we see them.

But Calvino says not only that we need "to seek and learn to recognize" these popular efforts at autogestion, he also says we need to "help them endure" and "give them space." Once we are able to perceive these popular efforts, how might we help them endure and give them space? Here we must begin by rejecting the thinking of the old left, in which political success is defined by seizing state power and controlling the governing institutions of society. Lefebvre's right to the city emphatically rejects that course of action. We should not seek to seize the power of the state. Rather Lefebvre insists that we must reclaim and develop *our own* power, the power that has been alienated to an oligarchical state structure. But still, *how* can we help our own power to endure? I think in order to do that, we must always begin from the understanding that our power is *already* active and alive. People are going about the work of creating urban society and becoming-democratic right now. They are exploring their capacity to govern themselves. Their own power already contains the capacity to endure; it already has an impulse toward self-preservation and self-realization[12]. So the political task is not to *invent* that power or cause it to come into existence. It already exists and is struggling to endure. The only thing we need to do is to *help* people do what they are already doing.

In addition, we should not think that 'we' are the subject of Calvino's sentence, and that 'we' are helping the power of a 'them' to endure. By definition, *everyone* can participate in the struggle for urban society. *Everyone* can manage their affairs for themselves. That is precisely the path the right to the city opens up: everyone struggling together to manage the city for themselves. 'We' is everyone; there is no 'them'. Whatever actions we take to move toward the horizon of urban society should merely seek to help popular desire do what it is already doing.

And Calvino's phrase "give it space" suggests that even if the desire for urban society is already enduring on its own, there is in fact some need to shelter it, to protect it from threat. Indeed, there are numerous forces that will work relentlessly to capture, govern, lead, institutionalize, and otherwise control our desire to manage our own affairs. We very much need to ward off those forces, to carve out and defend a space in which urban society can grow on its own terms. In one sense that space is a literal space: we need ways to create physical space for encounter and self-management. There are many different tactical strategies here (camps, *piquetes*, barricades, human cordons, and so on), and I don't want to go into detail. These strategies are designed not to confront the state or capital, but simply to hold the space, to create a perimeter around the space so people can inhabit it, so that we make room for people to practice autogestion. Of course, people must then use the space by drawing themselves together into an encounter, to listen to and learn about each other, and to debate among themselves what they want the city to be. Here again the practical forms are many: popular assemblies, working groups, *marchas populares, encuentros*, and so on. These kinds of encounters are instantiations of, and struggles on the path toward, Lefebvre's urban society.

If our own popular power is not to be found 'out there' but is already within us, then we require strategies to help ourselves understand and mobilize that power. We need techniques to nourish our own desire for democracy and urban society. Even if these desires are already at work, they are also new and unfamiliar to us,

and so we need to practice being with others in a collective discussion of how we might manage our affairs for ourselves. We need to learn how to engage in politics as Aristotle understood them: how to speak and listen to others on an equal footing in an effort to both engage seriously with different understandings and to develop common understandings of a good community. There is something like this going on today in Spain. As the *indignados* have moved past the heady early days of mass mobilization and protest, they have begun to experiment with new practices, new concrete modes of connection and common action. For example, under the slogan "*Toma los barrios*,"[13] they have taken the assemblies they were conducting in the main squares of Madrid back out into the neighborhoods of the city (Sanchez, 2012). They are trying to reinvigorate a long tradition of popular neighborhood assemblies in Spain. As in Argentina, the idea is not for the neighborhood assemblies to be merely the smallest scale of government, but to remain independent of the state and the formal economy, to create forms of autonomous organization for local inhabitants. People are constructing an arena in which to make neighborhood decisions, an arena created and controlled by the neighbors themselves. The assemblies are also providing some measure of social services, organizing to stop evictions, monitoring human rights of immigrants, planting community gardens, or creating of 'time banks', which are a system of sharing resources and meeting local needs outside the market sphere. The assemblies therefore manifest some amount of state-like institutionalization. They tinker with how to routinize practices and create rules of conduct. Some even have commissions to adjudicate disputes (Sanchez, 2012, and see for example the *asamblea* in La Concepcion at http://asambleapopularlaconce.wordpress.com/). But, following Lefebvre, we should not read this sort of experimentation to be the movement maturing into a 'real' movement that moves 'beyond protest' and gets down to the important work of influencing decisions in the corridors of power. Rather we should be attentive to the extent to which these initiatives are searching attempts to continue the struggle toward the horizon of urban society, to find ways to live that are not just protest, not just indignation, not just mass demonstrations, but are also efforts to forge positive alternatives, to invent democratic collectives that can think and act outside the state and outside the capitalist market. These collectives may tinker with institutions, with rules, with leaders. They will try them out, see how they work. But the struggle to move toward urban society means never settling down into those institutions. It means always renewing their commitment to manage their own affairs by continually remaking the structures they create, always disassembling institutions, recalling leaders, and reaffirming that it is the active participation of people themselves that constitutes the community and the movement.

So, Lefebvre's concepts of urban society and the right to the city and his method of transduction opens up a whole new way to think about urban governance and the local public realm. It is not a question of seizing power, of winning elections, of resisting neoliberalization and austerity by returning to the old ways of the welfare state. Rather it is a question of seeking and learning to recognize our own power, and helping that power to grow and spread on its own terms. Instead of lamenting these revolutions as a failure because they did not take state power, we should be attentive to the joy and power of these events. We should document and narrate the exhilaration that participant after participant reported having felt as they refused to be ruled and took on the challenge of ruling themselves. We must sing the delight of those in the assemblies in Madrid, and the reclaimed factories in Argentina, and

the encampments in Tahrir, who by declaring their intention to govern themselves realized that they had an extraordinary capacity to do so, a capacity most didn't know they had. It is that joy and delight in discovering democracy and urban society that we must seek and learn to recognize, that we must return to and nurture, and that we must help to grow and spread. The right to the city is thus revolutionary without ever achieving a revolution. It is a perpetual struggle that can have no final victory. It is a hard but joyful project to cut a path to the possible and to flourish together, on our own terms, as inhabitants and users of the city.

Notes

[1] Auto = self; hetero = other; nomos = law. Bakunin (1972; 1973) makes much of this distinction. Kant does as well, in his ethics (1964), though he relies on a hyper-rationalist conception of the self as an independent monad, a conception Bakunin bitterly rejected.

[2] This list would include, but is not limited to: Deleuze and Guattari, Lefebvre, Foucault, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Ranciere, Agamben, as well as the writings of both Tiqqun and the Invisible Committee.

[3] The source of the neuroscience they cite is António Damásio (2003).

[4] The same is true of many radical thinkers in France during the 1960s and 1970s. Cornelius Castoriadis (1988), Guy Debord (1983), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1977;1987; 1994), and Michel Foucault (1980), among others, were all appalled by Stalinism, and their work became as much a reaction against state and bureaucratic domination as against capitalism.

[5] As for example in Russia during the revolution, Germany in 1914–18, Italy in 1919–20, Spain in 1936–7, Indonesia 1945–6, France in 1973, Portugal 1974–5, Britain in 1981, Yugoslavia under Tito, Argentina in 2001, and so on. A comprehensive collection on the topic is Ness and Azzellini (2011).

[6] Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden edited the collection and did much of the translation. Their work on both counts is an important part of why the volume is such a great help in understanding Lefebvre's wider project.

[7] All of the quotes in this paragraph appeared originally in Lefebvre's essay, *Les sources de la théorie Marxiste-Leniniste de l'État* (1964).

[8] The French literally means 'the to inhabit', and it is derived from Heidegger's concept of dwelling (*das Wohnen*). There is also quite a lot of resonance here with Lewis Mumford's (1937) idea of 'effective social intercourse'.

[9] This concept of development is not precisely defined in the book. It can be read as the Aristotelian idea of the full development of each inhabitant's natural human potential, or it can be read as a Marxist idea of human flourishing in an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. I think the two interpretations have much more in common than we tend to think.

[10] Literally: "would that they all go," or more colloquially "throw them all out," the phrase expresses, for many, the idea that changing the party or particular officials who are currently staffing the government is not enough, that the entire governmental structure is inadequate to the task at hand.

[11] Hence the signs that read, "el sistema no esta en crisis: la crisis es el sistema".

[12] Its own *conatus sese conservandi*, as Spinoza (1996, especially Part 3) phrases it.

[13] Take (or reclaim) the neighborhoods.

References

Adamovsky, E, 2003, Pots, pans, and popular power: The neighborhood assemblies of Buenos Aires, in Notes from nowhere (ed), *We are everywhere: The irresistible rise of global anticapitalism*, New York: Verso, 422–7

Badiou, A, 2008, The Communist hypothesis, *New Left Review*, 49, Jan/Feb: 29–42

Badiou, A, 2011, The democratic emblem, in G Agamben (ed), *Democracy in What State?*, New York: Columbia University Press, 6–15

Bakunin, M, 1972, *Bakunin on anarchy*, S Dolgoff (trans), New York: Knopf

Bakunin, M, 1973, *Michael Bakunin: Selected writings*, S Cox, O Stevens (trans), London: Jonathan Cape

Bevir, M, 2011, Governance and governmentality after neoliberalism, *Policy & Politics*, 39, 4: 457–71

Brenner, N, 2005, *New state spaces: Urban governance and the rescaling of statehood*, New York: Oxford University Press

Brenner, N, Marcuse, P, Mayer, M (eds), 2011, *Cities for people, not for profit*, New York: Routledge

Brenner, N, Theodore, N (eds), 2003, *Spaces of neoliberalism*, Maden, MA: Blackwell

Calvino, I, 1972, *Le Citta Invisibili*, Verona: Mondadori, 1993

Castoriadis, C, 1988, *Political and social writings*, D Curtis (trans), Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press

Colombo, P, Mascarenhas, T, 2003, We're nothing: We want to be everything, in Notes From Nowhere (ed), *We are everywhere: The irresistible rise of global anticapitalism*, New York: Verso, 458–63

Damasio, A, 2003, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, sorrow, and the feeling brain*, New York: Harcourt

Debord, G, 1967, *Society of the spectacle*, Detroit: Black and Red, 1983

Deleuze, G, Guattari, F, 1972, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*, R Hurley, M Seem, H Lane (trans), New York: Penguin, 1977

Deleuze, G, Guattari, F, 1980, *A thousand plateaus,* B Massumi (trans), Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987

Deleuze, G, Guattari, F, 1991, *What is philosophy?,* H Tomlinson, G Burchell (trans), New York: Columbia University Press, 1994

Douzinas, C, Zizek, S (eds), 2010, *The idea of Communism*, London: Verso

Elden, S, 2004, *Understanding Henri Lefebvre: Theory and the possible*, New York: Continuum

Foucault, M, 1980, *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–77*, C Gordon (ed), New York: Pantheon

Friedmann, J, 1995, The right to the city, *Society and Nature,* 1, 1, 71–84

Geddes, M, 2011, Neoliberalism and local governance: Global contrasts and research priorities, *Policy & Politics,* 39, 3, 439–47

Hackworth, J, 2006, *The neoliberal city: Governance, ideology, and development in American urbanism*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press

Hardt, M, Negri, A, 2000, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Hardt, M, Negri, A, 2004, *Multitude: War and democracy in the age of empire*, New York: Penguin

Harvey, D, 2003, A right to the city, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research,* 27, 4, 939–41

Harvey, D, 2005, *A brief history of neoliberalism*, New York: Oxford University Press

Harvey, D, 2008, The right to the city, *New Left Review,* 53, September–October, 23–40

Hobbes, T, 1651, *Leviathan*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996

Jessop, B, 2002, Liberalism, neoliberalism, and urban governance: A state-theoretical perspective, *Antipode,* 34, 3, 452–72

Jones, M, 1999, *New institutional spaces: Training and enterprise councils and the remaking of economic governance*, London: Jessica Kingsley

Kant, I, 1785, *Groundwork of the metaphysic of morals*, H Paton (trans), New York: Harper & Row, 1964

Lauria, M (ed), 1997, *Reconstructing urban regime theory: Regulating urban politics in a global economy*, London: Sage

Lefebvre, H, 1964, Les sources de la théorie marxiste-leniniste de l'état, *Les cahiers du centre d'etudes socialistes,* 42/43, 31–48

Lefebvre, H, 1970, *La révolution urbaine*, Paris: Editions Gallimard

Lefebvre, H, 1990, Du pacte social au contrat de citoyennete, in Groupe de Navarrenx (ed), *Du contrat de citoyennete*, Paris: Editions Syllepse et Editions Periscope, 15–37

Lefebvre, H, 1996, *Writings on cities*, E Kofman, E Lebas (trans), Cambridge, MA: Blackwell

Lefebvre, H, 2003a, From the social pact to the contract of citizenship, in S Elden, E Lebas, E Kofman (eds), *Henri Lefebvre: Key writings*, New York: Continuum, 238–54

Lefebvre, H, 1970, *The urban revolution*, R Bononno (trans), Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003b

Lefebvre, H, 2009, *State, space, world: Selected essays*, G Moore, N Brenner, S Elden (trans), Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press

MacLeod, G, 2002, From urban entrepreneurialism to a 'revanchist city'? On the spatial injustices of Glasgow's renaissance, *Antipode,* 34, 3, 602–24

Mayer, M, 2007, Contesting the neoliberalization of urban governance, in H Leitner, J Peck, E Sheppard (eds), *Contesting Neoliberalism*, New York: Guilford Press, 90–115

Mitchell, D, 2003, *The right to the city: Social justice and the fight for public space*, New York: Guilford Press

Mumford, L, 1937, What is a city?, *Architectural Record,* 82, November

Ness, I, Azzellini, D (eds), 2011, *Ours to master and to own*, Chicago: Haymarket Books

Peck, J, 1998, Geographies of governance: Tecs and the Neo-liberalisation of 'local interests', *Space & Polity,* 2, 1, 5–31

Peck, J, Tickell, A, 2002, Neoliberalizing space, in N Brenner, N Theodore (eds), *Spaces of Neoliberalism*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 33–57

People's Assembly of Syntagma Square, 2011, Vote of the People's Assembly of Syntagma Square, Athens, May 27, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Vote_of_ the_People%27s_Assembly_of_Syntagma_Square.svg

Purcell, M, 2002, Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant, *GeoJournal* 58, 2–3, 99–108

Purcell, M, 2008, *Recapturing democracy: Neoliberalization and the struggle for alternative urban futures*, New York: Routledge

Ranciere, J, 2003, From the actuality of Communism to its inactuality, Paper given at 'The Actuality of Communism' conference, University of Frankfurt

Sanchez, M, 2012, *Losing Strength? An alternative vision of Spain's Indignados movement*. www.roarmag.org, June 26.

Somerville, P, 2011, Democracy and participation, *Policy & Politics,* 39, 3, 417–37

Spinoza, B, 1677, *Ethics*, E Curley (trans), New York: Penguin Classics, 1996

Staeheli, L, Kodras, J, Flint, C (eds), 1997, *State devolution in America: Implications for a diverse society*, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage

Stoker, G, 2010, The rise of political disenchantment, in C Hay (ed), *New directions in political science*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 43–63

Swyngedouw, E, 2005, Governance innovation and the citizen: The Janus face of governance-beyond-the-state, *Urban Studies,* 42, 11, 1991–2006

The Invisible Committee, 2009, *The coming insurrection*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)

UN-HABITAT, 2010, *The right to the city: Bridging the urban divide*, World Urban Forum, Rio de Janeiro: United Nations