

Reconceptualising the Right to the City and Spatial Justice Through Social Ecology

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Introduction: Critically Exploring the Right to the City

The aim of this work is to discuss the right to the city, spatial justice and social ecology in order to create new tools and understandings at the service of urban social movements aiming towards ecological and democratic cities.¹

This work is divided in five sections. In the first and second sections the concepts of the right² to the city and spatial justice are introduced, while the third highlights a convergence between the two concepts. In the fourth, social ecology is used in order to explore key concepts such as citizenship, justice and freedom. Building on the previous section, in the fifth the right to the city and spatial justice are finally reconceptualised through social ecology. The main aim of this work, in light of the holistic social change approach, is to reframe the concepts of the right to the city and spatial justice in order to strengthen them and make them more complete.

Since Lefebvre introduced the concept in 1968, the right to the city has been used by different actors for different agendas. In this chapter, however, I focus on the academic and political discussions around the right to the city, avoiding those debates with more institutionalized formulations of the concept. The political philosophy of the right to the city shares many common traits with social ecology, starting with the centrality of the city in discussions of the urban crisis.

Attoh (2011: 670) explores the broadness and difficulty of precisely defining the right to the city: the concept is still “vague and radically open” and this makes it possible for different actors to use it for different purposes. For Lefebvre, the right to the city is “like a cry and a demand” (1996: 158). At the same time, it is a necessity to surpass current inequalities and fulfil basic needs, and an aspiration for change (Marcuse 2012).

However, Lefebvre never fully defined the term (Souza 2010; Attoh 2011). In one of the more articulated expressions he says that “the right to the city, complemented by the right to difference and the right to information, should modify, concretize and make more practical the rights of the citizen as a urban dweller (*cidatin*) and user of multiple services” (Lefebvre 1996: 34). The right to the city is the right to full and equal enjoyment of the resources and services concentrated in cities, something that would only be fully possible in another, non-capitalist society (Souza 2012b). Lefebvre underlines that the right to the city moves towards a “transformed and renewed right to urban life” (Lefebvre 1996: 158), defined as the possibility for people to shape their own city, where the concept of “autogestion” (self-management) is crucial. In Lefebvre’s work

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there is a critique of state power that also resonates with the social ecology approach to direct action. Today state policies are blocking the building of a city shaped on citizenship: “The incompatibility between the state and the urban is radical in nature. The state can only prevent the urban from taking shape” (Lefebvre 2003: 180). This effect of the State is rooted in its nature, which “has to control the urban phenomenon...to retard its development, to push it in the direction of institutions that extend to society as a whole, through exchange and the market” (Lefebvre 2003: 180). Self-management is thus crucial. Harvey stresses that the right to the city is “the freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves” (Harvey 2008: 23), putting the emphasis on the collective aspect of this right. From a Marxist perspective, the right to the city helps in understanding “the necessary connection between urbanization and surplus production and use” (Harvey 2008: 40). The call for a “real” right to the city comes from the oppressed. As Marcuse (2012: 32) points out, from an economic point of view it comes from the “most marginalized and the most underpaid and insecure members of the working class” and from a cultural expression it comes from the directly oppressed and alienated. It is thus a unifying call for all who have not.

With this radical (and matching the original Lefebvrian formulation) interpretation of the right to the city, urban social movements around the world have started to claim the idea in order to gain access to needs and services and to re-shape the city (Hamel, Lustiger-Thaler and Mayer 2000). At the same time, they have gained strength from it. As Soja (2010: 109) affirms, the right to the city “can help to *unite diverse and particularized struggle into larger and more powerful movements*”. Indeed, as Harvey and Potter (2009: 48) point out, the right to the city is a process, continuously shaped by our desire and new challenges and built around “social solidarities”. In this, urban social movements play a crucial role, affirming the right to the city in different spatial and social forms:

The inalienable right to the city rests upon the capacity to force open spaces of the city to protest and contention, to create unmediated public spaces, so that the cauldron of urban life can become a catalytic site from which new conceptions and configurations of urban living can be devised and out of which new and less damaging conceptions of rights can be constructed. (Harvey and Potter 2009: 49)

Thus, in this radical interpretation, the right to the city is a protest call to enable the opening of new social paths towards a better kind of urban living.

However, NGOs, international bodies, and municipal authorities all around the globe have assumed a different perspective on the right to the city. Activist-scholar D’Souza (2016: 7) pointed out “the rights discourse

today is a cacophony of discordant voices”. This plurality of actors and institutions invoke the notion of rights, yet adopt different ideological orientations that suit other agendas. For example, Kuymulu (2013: 93) found that “UN agencies have not only attempted to co-opt the content of the notion as established by the existing right to the city movements, but have also attempted to rewrite the history of this concept”. One of the main activities of NGOs, international bodies and city authorities—under the slogan of the right to the city—is thus based around the development and implementation of charters of the right to the city. As Mayer (2012; 2013) points out, this approach presents several issues: (1) it excludes what is not in the list; (2) in contrast to the class reference of the Lefebvrian right to the city, it does not acknowledge class and power divisions; and (3) “the demands for rights as enumerated merely target particular aspects of neoliberal policy” (2012: pp. 74–75), watering down the radical call to transform the city.

Souza (2010: 317) holds a similar position, asserting that the right to the city for NGOs and official agencies (as well for some social movements) can be summarized as “the right to a better, more ‘human’ life in the context of the capitalist city, the capitalist society and on the basis of a (‘reformed’ and ‘improved’) representative ‘democracy’”, with the aim of fixing the current political and economic system, not challenging it.

Critically Exploring Spatial Justice

Spatial justice is another key concept for current urban social movements. Justice is a concept that has been always invoked by social movements, especially from the spatial perspective. For example the following quote, referring to an American city, dramatically captures the experience of the urban poor:

People in the ghetto know perfectly well it is different in other neighbourhoods that are whiter and wealthier. They know that this is not accidental. They might be fuzzy on the history and the exact actors, and might even have bought into the sizeable efforts to blame the poor for their own poverty, but the culpability of banks, city officials, employers, corporations and absentee landlords is widely, if rather intuitively, understood. Which means that people understand that they live in a space that is socially produced, and could even tell you how that works though they would never articulate it using this kind of language. (Gibbon 2010: 619)

The poor have a clear understanding of the spatial dimension of inequalities, calling for the end of them, and for justice.

The Western concept of justice originated in ancient Greece and is strongly linked to the formation of citizenship and direct democracy in

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ancient Athens (Soja 2010: 75). With the creation of the Nation-State, the idea of justice has been conceptualized as provided by the State, but not as part of the concept of citizenship. However, justice cannot only be linked to the kind of justice administered by the State. It assumes a broader meaning of *just* or *fair*, linked to “the qualities of a just society: freedom, liberty, equality, democracy, [and] civil rights” (Soja 2010: 20). For Soja (2010), justice is a concept that should go beyond class, race, and gender. Justice and injustice, as concepts, pervade our world on multiple levels and are deeply nested in the current socioeconomic system, but they can be challenged and changed through social and political action (Soja 2010). As Harvey recognises, economic inequality and injustice are both a production of capitalist urban development:

Capital represents itself in the form of a physical landscape created in its own image, created as use values to enhance the progressive accumulation of capital. The geographical landscape which results is the crowning glory of past capitalist development. (1985: 25)

Subsequently, Soja (2010) also recognised the importance of looking at the spatial dimension of justice and developed “spatial justice” as a core concept. Even without negating the importance of the historical and sociological approaches of justice, focusing on the spatial helps highlight hidden aspects or discover new perspectives for action. In a recent discussion on spatial justice, Iveson (2011: 255) affirms that “the attention to space can help highlight the spatial relations in which place-based issues and actors are enmeshed”.

Spatial justice, as a concept used in analysing current urban crises, can firstly help cast “new light on the processes through which socio-spatial injustice is reproduced, perpetuated and sometimes aggravated in our times” (Souza 2011: 73). Thus, focusing on the negation of spatial justice can be a powerful tool, both helping to understand how injustice is created and highlighting where to act.

Secondly, a focus on the affirmation of spatial justice can help reveal “the spatial practices by means of which protagonists of socio-spatial change (above all emancipative social movements) are challenging injustice and trying to build alternatives” (ibid). As with the right to the city, spatial justice becomes an agenda for urban social movements to follow in order to reshape the city. A connection can be made between the two concepts, as I will show in the next section.

A Convergence of Concepts

The concepts of right to the city and spatial justice can both be used as analytical tools to highlight current urban crises and as proactive slogans

upon which to build social struggles. Looking at the intersection between the creation of space, the negation of rights, and social injustice is crucial to understanding the urban crisis and developing strategies for social change.

In this section I argue that there is a further connection that needs to be made between the right to the city and spatial justice. As Uitermark (2012) considers, a just city presupposes equity, distribution of resources and democratic control toward the full implementation of the right to the city. The right to the city and spatial justice thus work hand-in-hand towards the construction of a just city. This link is very clear, for example, when Zárate (2015) titles an essay *The Cities We Want: Right to the City and Social Justice for All*. In the same vein, Marcuse (2012: 35) stresses that the right to the city is not a mere set of individual rights but connected to the idea of justice: “The right to the city is a moral claim, founded on fundamental principles of justice”. The concept of rights and justice refer to a similar moral stand. Moreover, “a good [and just] city should not be simply a city with distributional equity, but one that supports the full development of each individual and of all individuals” (Marcuse 2009: 2).

In their positive affirmation, both spatial justice and the right to the city are demanding fulfilment for humans in the urban environment. In their negation they are also deeply connected: spatial injustice is the negation of the right to the city (and vice versa). Moreover, they are determined or negated under the same political frame: “Urban rights and justice are therefore mediated by the spatial organization of political powers” (Harvey and Potter 2009: 42). It is thus clear that the two concepts of right to the city and spatial justice are strictly interdependent and intertwined (Mitchell 2003)—one needs the other for its full positive realization. Both concepts go beyond class, race, and gender, and should be able to mobilize a large part of the population (Harvey 2003; Soja 2010). Furthermore, they both refer to the need to create a true citizenship. However, the concept of citizenship is a “multifaceted idea” (Souza 1999: 171) theorized by various authors and traditions, depending on specific national and juridical contexts. Often, innovations have been implemented under pressure from urban social movements, as stressed by Holston: “The right to the city arguments of the urban social movements embodied the struggle of residents for this recognition of being citizens who bear the right to rights” (2008: 241). Citizenship is conceived as a distinction between those who may access rights in their daily life in the city and those who cannot. There is a continuous struggle for expanding the concept of citizenship and recognizing the rights of everyone, especially the oppressed.

Lefebvre explicitly said that a true right to the city “implies nothing less than a revolutionary conception of citizenship” (in Merrifield 2017: 23). From this perspective, urban social movements have actively built an insurgent citizenship (Holston 1998; 2008), a citizenship that attempts to

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subvert state agendas and enact real forms of citizenships based on “civil, political, and social rights available to people” (Holston 1998: 50), beyond formal forms of citizenships granted (and restricted) by the State. Insurgent citizenship is critical here and its objective is the disruption of granted norms and a transformation of the city (Holston 1998).

However, despite the normalised use of the concept of citizenship in society, contemporary urban social movements remain sceptical about using this concept as it indicates “distance, anonymity, and uncommon ground” (Holston 2009: 250). Citizenship is commonly used by institutional frameworks that do not easily allow for revolutionary usage. Furthermore, citizenship, in all its expression, is based on who is a citizen and who is not—as determined by the Nation-State (Sassen 2002). In this way urban social movements continuously struggle with public officials, but also with the public, to enlarge the base of citizenship.

Moreover, the concept of the right to the city has also been co-opted and distorted (Souza 2010; Kuymulu 2013). One example is the drafting of the Brazilian constitution, which actively engaged civil society, but led to a depletion and co-optation of urban social movements (Souza 2001).

Reconceptualising Citizenship, Justice, and Freedom

The concept of citizenship, despite its potential role in addressing urban crises, is thus deeply contested—social ecology offers a way forward. Bookchin’s approach can be illustrated on two levels. On the first, he defends a system based on rights (defined alternately as civil rights or human rights) and duties.³ They represent a crucial stage of social development, with the move from the uncertainty of tribal times to the introduction of a justice system based on laws (Bookchin 2005a). Rights represent the important achievements of popular struggles and should be preserved and defended (Bookchin 1986; 1999; Bookchin and Biehl 1991).

The second level is more fully developed and articulated, and addresses the core of the social ecology project, whose aim is to go beyond “contemporary citizenship within a depersonalized formal system of “rights” and “duties” (Bookchin 1988: 238).⁴ Bookchin tries to recover the “true” meaning of citizenship, referring to the Athenian formulation:

The Athenian notion of *arete*, the daily practice of *paideia*, and the institutional structure of the *polis* were synthesized into an ideal of citizenship that the individual tried to realize as a form of self-expression, not an obligatory burden of self-denial. Citizenship became an ethos, a creative art, indeed, a civic cult rather than a demanding body of duties and a palliative body of rights. (Bookchin 1995b: 75)

Citizenship thus needs to be affirmed as a praxis of citizens' expression towards self-realization. Moreover, Bookchin recognises the need to move towards a universal human commonality (Bookchin 2005a), thereby surpassing the parochial and non-universal connotation of citizenship as formulated in ancient Athens (Bookchin 1995b).

The concept of community, then, is crucial. An authentic community is “not merely a structural constellation of human beings but rather the practice of communizing” (Bookchin 2005a: 349). The expression of an active citizenship is then linked to the final expression of freedom, where citizenship can be conceived as a direct action that expresses itself in the practice of direct democracy, in the possibility to make decisions for one's own community (Bookchin 2005a).

Freedom thus also becomes a crucial concept in discussions of citizenship and, most importantly, of justice. As a concept, freedom is preferable to justice, being able to more fully address the problem of inequality:

Unlike justice, which works with the pretension that all are equal in theory, despite their many differences in fact, freedom makes no pretense that all are equals but tries to compensate for the inequalities that occur with age, physical infirmity, and different abilities. (Bookchin 1995a: 260)

Classically, the concept of justice was based on the fundamental idea of equality of human beings. The reality, however, is different:

To assume that everyone is “equal” is patently preposterous if they are regarded as “equal” in strength, intellect, training, experience, talent, disposition, and opportunities. Such “equality” scoffs at reality and denies the commonality and solidarity of the community by subverting its responsibilities to compensate for differences between individuals. (Bookchin 2005a: 219)

These differences mean that human beings vary with respect to their potentials and needs. Freedom, for Bookchin, recognises this point and posits the basis for a rational society on the idea that “as long as the means exist, they must be shared as much as possible according to needs—and needs are unequal insofar as they are gauged according to individual abilities and responsibilities” (Bookchin 2005a: 219). In social ecology, the concept of freedom is thus embedded in the idea of equality of unequals, an “unreflective form of social behaviour and distribution that compensates inequalities and does not yield to the fictive claim...that everyone is equal” (Bookchin 2005a: 219).

This is opposed to the use of justice, which “turns the equality of unequals into the inequality of equals” (Bookchin 2005a: 224). Bookchin agrees with the Marxist formulation of “from each according to his/her

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ability, to each according to his/her needs” In opposition to a “bourgeois right”, which claims “equality of all,” freedom abandons the very notion of “right” as such (Bookchin 2005a: 219). Freedom is thus a crucial pillar for an alternative society.

Reconceptualising the Right to the City and Spatial Justice

Just as we reconceptualised citizenship and justice, highlighting the importance of freedom is thus necessary to reconceptualise the right to the city and spatial justice through social ecology. The libertarian or anarchist tradition seems to remain impermeable to or suspicious about the idea of rights (Turner and Miller 2005); it is uncommon for radical thinkers to use this term.⁵ Contemporary rights are guaranteed and determined by states and international bodies, and, despite many significant improvements, their track record, from the standpoint of the libertarian or anarchist tradition, is poor and demands a radical change.

Questions regarding how rights are institutionalized, who guarantees them, and by what means can lead to a slippery debate. Fotopoulos (1997: 231–232), an author close to social ecology, affirms that there are two different traditions of rights. The first meaning is rooted in the “liberal conception of freedom, which is defined negatively as the absence of constraints on human activity; these rights are also defined in a negative way as ‘freedom from’, their explicit objective being to limit state power”. The second meaning, connected to the socialist tradition, opposes the liberal one, and affirms instead “social equality, mainly in the form of an equitable participation in the production and distribution of the social product, achieved through state intervention. These rights are therefore “collective” in the sense that they belong more to communities or whole societies rather than to individuals”. For Fotopoulos, however, both conceptions have limitations. Firstly, they are grounded on the reductionist idea that the political and economic spheres are always separated, missing a holistic approach to human rights. Secondly, and most importantly, both forms of rights make sense only in a statist form of government, and presuppose the existence of “political and economic power...concentrated in the hands of elites”, while, “in a non-statist type of democracy, which by definition involves the equal sharing of power, these rights become meaningless”. Bookchin goes in the same direction and, although having explored the concept of rights, he values and elaborates more on the social dimension of concepts like cooperation and mutualism, a position that is shared among social ecology authors, who have avoided basing their work on the concept of rights.⁶

A similar approach is taken with respect to the concept of justice, as seen in the previous section. Social ecology aspires to a broader change than the one proposed, for example, within the idea of a just city “in which

public investments and regulation would produce equitable outcomes rather than support those already well off” (Fainstein 2010: 3). Social ecology aspires to go beyond a mere fix of the current problems, aiming at affirming the freedom for all to self-determination.

Moreover, for social ecology it is important to go beyond the distinction between right and justice. Even if we consider the right to the city as a different right, the definition remains vague. For example, for Marcuse (2014: 5) the right to the city is “not a Right in the sense of a legal claim enforceable through the judicial system, but a moral right, an appeal to the highest of human values”. However, these highest human values remain again opaque or vague. Furthermore a radical social change cannot be limited only to the full and equal enjoyment of the resources and services concentrated in cities, as instead prescribed by the right to the city.

According to dialectical naturalism, the crucial point is to consider whether rights or justice, or other concepts, are able to foster mutualism, differentiation, and development, as proposed by Heller (1999), for the creation of an ecological society. In this way social ecology is able to broaden the discussion around those terms and put them at the service of social change. For example, in an attempt to go beyond particularism and expand the notion of the right to the city, Souza (2014) proposes the right to the *planet*, bridging it to the experience of social ecology (and of Cornelius Castoriadis). Moreover, the notion of a right to the planet, which is based on the affirmation of freedom, can help establish who is a citizen or not, and move us towards affirming the concept of world-wide citizenship, echoed by the verse “our homeland is the whole world, our law is liberty” (from an anarchist song of the 19th century).

Lefebvre spoke about a planetary urbanization (2003), echoing a city without limits (Bookchin 1986). Indeed, Lefebvre (2013) agrees with Bookchin’s claim that today’s cities are creating an amorphous urban environment that absorbs all the space, negating nature and the social aspects of the original meaning of city. Given this kind of planetary urbanization, it is becoming difficult to speak about a right to the city. From this perspective, Merrifield (2013) argues that Lefebvre’s right to the city may not be useful simply because we no longer have cities.

Social ecology’s proposal for a new society is, therefore, more articulated than the concept of the right to the city or spatial justice. As suggested by Souza (2012a: 24), a grassroots revolution for a new world “should be conceived as something even more complex than just the ‘right to the city’ in Lefebvre’s sense”. As we struggle, it is necessary to include concepts like political decentralisation, economic de-concentration, and “conviviality” (Illich 1973), ecological soundness, egalitarian access to resources and opportunities of self-development, and ethno-diversity. And here, it is probably accurate to say that Murray Bookchin can help us better than

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Henri Lefebvre”. Social ecology, with its dialectical naturalism and analysis of freedom and domination, offers powerful tools to carve out new modes for society (Venturini forthcoming).

In any case, rights to the city and spatial justice remain important concepts to be used, especially by urban social movements, as mobilizing concepts that are able to speak to a broad, transclass and transnational audience. Moreover, both concepts focus their attention on the spatiality and geography of the city and its crises. What I propose is a *spatial turn* for social ecology—it should pay greater attention to spatial dynamics and processes. For example, the individuation of the negation or lack of rights to the city and of spatial justice (for example where the right to the city is negated or where there is spatial injustice) would make it possible to highlight the urban crisis, and prepare the ground for struggle and the construction of an ecological society.

Further, both concepts are transformative; they presuppose a sea change in the social, economic and political sphere, clearly connecting with the power and transformative agenda of urban social movements.

However, I agree with Uitermark Nicholls and Loopmans (2012: 2548) that “while there certainly are movements claiming a right to the city, it is clear that the concept remains much more popular in academic than in movement circles”. To break this elite perspective and offer a new perspective to urban social movements, the right to the city and spatial justice assumes real value only when paired with the concept of domination. For example:

Social justice—including in this spatial justice...is, of course, fundamentally a matter of power, not simply of ethics. If injustice is supposed to be related to illegitimate, unequal access to resources and means of exercising some rights, it is related to heteronomous power: that is, to oppression and domination. (Souza 2011: 73)

The concept of “fighting against all forms of domination” towards freedom developed in social ecology can be taken as a unifying concept that includes and amplifies the agenda of both right to the city and spatial justice.

In particular, the use of the concept of “domination” allows a more holistic vision of the social issues. Social ecology does not single out specific struggles, but moves holistically against domination, with a broader understanding of crises. Social ecology, highlighting the linkages between all forms of domination, not only calls for the coordination of different struggles that urban social movements pursue, in order to reinforce them, but also highlights the need to focus on a change that is broader and more fundamental.

Conclusion

To conclude, the right to the city and spatial justice are concepts that share three principle areas of common ground. First, they go beyond class, race, and gender. Second, each is used in order to mobilize large parts of the population. Finally, they both refer to citizenship. However citizenship is not a concept that is commonly used by urban social movements because they are suspicious of a term already co-opted by the State.

Today we live in a world where we must deal with the State while finding a new revolutionary path, in an approach that Souza (2006: 327) called “together *with* the State, *despite* the State, *against* the State”. The concept of the right to the city is a necessary mobilizing concept, but alone it is not sufficient. Indeed, D’Souza (2018: 210) reminds us that:

We have inherited rights-based institutions. Do we need to, for that reason, demand rights, struggle for them and place our futures in its power of promise, knowing the promises are empty for most people most of the time? What did the socialists and the freedom fighters in anti-colonial movements do? They demanded the real thing—food not right to food, national independence not right to independence, peace not right to peace, debt-repudiation not forgiveness.

If urban social movements want to recuperate key terms like citizenship, rights, and participation for building a truly revolutionary citizenship, they could link them to freedom and to the project of direct democracy—not only as a practice, but as a discourse. Linking these key concepts with something not yet incorporated into the current dominant system could help develop a coherent and resilient project, and gain popular support for ecological and democratic cities.

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Notes

1. I would like to thank Janet Biehl for advising me on relevant Bookchin’s quotes.
2. For reason of space, this work does not explore the debates on the origin of rights, individual legal rights and natural rights.

3. For Bookchin, rights are a human construction and need to be based on objective assumptions. When based on freedom or self-consciousness, they would better be called “norms” or “ethical standards”. These are things that people would ultimately want to achieve (Bookchin, in Evanoff 2007).
4. Although Bookchin seems to side with a natural conception of rights, he sidelined the debate on the origin of rights.
5. An interesting exception is the work of Kropotkin that speaks extensively about the right to live, to have food and to resist. His slogan is emblematic: “What we proclaim is the Right to Well-Being: Well-Being for All!” (Kropotkin 2011: 14).
6. The only exception is the work of Roussopoulos (2013; 2015; 2017a), who explores the use of the right to the city and its implementation, using the creation of charters as his main example. This implementation is for him a way to incrementally address the possibility of citizenship being affirmed. However, this approach cannot clearly define the connection between the affirmation of such rights and the social ecology project. Moreover, it is not able to respond to the aforementioned critiques of the use of charters by Mayer and Souza.