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On the right to the city

Sobre o direito à cidade

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the political usefulness and the challenges met by the right to the city concept, departing from its initial formulation by Henry Lefebvre in the late sixties. The main theoretical proposals around the concept will be briefly discussed, from Edward Soja's spatial justice to David Harvey's rebel cities, in an attempt to highlight the most important aspects of the debate and identify its relevance for the quality of democracy.

Keywords: right to the city; spatial justice; rebel cities; quality of democracy

RESUMO

O artigo discute a pertinência política e os desafios inerentes ao conceito de direito à cidade, partindo da sua formulação inicial por Henry Lefebvre no final dos anos sessenta. As principais propostas teóricas em torno do conceito serão brevemente discutidas, da justiça espacial de Edward Soja às cidades rebeldes de David Harvey, numa tentativa de destacar os aspetos mais importantes do debate e identificar a sua relevância para a qualidade da democracia.

Palavras-chave: direito à cidade; justiça espacial; cidades rebeldes; qualidade da democracia

1. Lefebvre

In the heat of the late 60ties, Lefebvre (2012) departed from the effects of industrialization on urban society to present the concept of the right to the city, hence initiating a lasting theoretical discussion that maintains its vitality. Industrialization is understood as a disrupting process that requires the breach of the pre-existing urban system, thus producing a clash between the urban and the industrial realities. The crisis of the city emerges from the reconfiguration of the urban system around the demands of the industrialization process, which in an initial moment triggers the «explosion» of the traditional city. Subsequently, the urban society develops on the ruins of the ancient city that is no longer the passive receptacle of industrialization. Those who detain information, culture and power retain the capacity of deciding on the urbanization process through the exploitation of labour entailed in the industrial production.

Throughout the nineteenth century an urban democracy could have risen, but since it threatened the privileges of the new ruling class, it was prevented from being born by the expulsion of the proletariat from the city centre and from the city itself. The working class suffers the segregating consequences of the explosion of ancient urban morphologies. The old proletarian misery is attenuated and tends to disappear in the large industrial countries but a new poverty emerges, a misery of the habitat that affects all those expelled from the centres to the outskirts and thus become deprived of the city. In these difficult conditions arise the rights that define civilization, the right to work, education, health, housing. Among these entitlements is the right to the city, understood as the right to a urban life translated in the full use of times and locations. For the working class this right has a particular value but it also represents the general interests of civilization and the particular interests of all social strata of people for whom integration and participation matter.

The urban reform envisioned by Lefebvre has a revolutionary range since it gives way to a strategy which opposes the strategy of the currently ruling class. It entails a revolutionary transformation of society necessarily planned by the working class and its political representatives that will result in socialism. The proletariat is the one who can destroy the ideology of consumption and produce a distinctive new liberal humanism, the humanism of

the urban man whose implementation will require three types of revolution: economic (reorientation of urban planning for social needs); political (democratic control of the state and self-management) and cultural. As Marcuse (2014) points out, Lefebvre makes a moral claim for social justice sustained in the highest human values. The metaphoric city represents a new way of life for the urban society in general and its realization demands for a deep reconfiguration of the power structures behind urbanization.

2. Travelling with the concept

Beyond its metaphoric understanding, the right to the city is a broad concept that requires further clarification on which rights it entails and who will benefit from them. It can be regarded as an exclusive right for the most dispossessed – the homeless, ethnic minorities, people in a situation of poverty - thus entailing a positive discrimination dimension aimed at contradicting the inequalities produced by the capitalist system; or it can be understood as an inclusive right ascribed to all those who live in the city and desire to accede its resources and opportunities to satisfy their needs and aspirations. But a right to what, specifically? A right to housing, to transportation, to resources, to common goods, to define the way the urban space is organized, or all those combined? And what if these various rights - and all those who believe themselves entitled to them - conflict with each other? Who and what takes precedence?

The multidimensionality of the concept entails a conflicting dimension that complexifies it and as such it can hardly be regarded as a single uniform entity that is there to be enjoyed equally by all. Attoh (2011) argues that second generation socio-economic rights that pertain to the right to the city are potentially incompatible to the extent that their promotion implies costs that demand for the sacrifice of some for the others. Besides, while an individual or a group acquire the right to occupy, design or define the public space, others are denied that same right as long as their goals and interests are not compatible, which often happens in a complex urban society, where different cultures, religions and races coexist in anonymity and rapidly interact with each other. A society that extends more

and more into the countryside, as the metropolis extends and embraces new territories, fading the boundaries that once limited it. On the other hand, if individuals or groups have the right to enjoy their way of life autonomously, without state interference, others may feel disregarded or offended. A good example of this is the way the city deals with its Roma inhabitants, which maintain specificities that are often seen as inadequate by the general population, leading to the classical conflict minority *versus* majority.

To determine which rights to the city should be granted to whom it is necessary to situate that same city in its democratic context and so obtain the necessary background in terms of intended goals. If the quality of the democratic system is at stake, then the right to the city must be conceived in order to enhance it as much as possible. However, the matter of the quality of democracy is a complex one and it can be understood and measured differently. For instance, it may depend on its contribution to individual freedom, regarded in terms of autonomy achieved through resources, institutions, deliberating arenas and reason (Ringen, 2011), or it can be related with institutional characteristics like consensus democracy (Lijphart, 2011).

Taking on Dahl's (1973) definition, democracy is a political system characterized by the quality of being completely or almost completely responsive to all its citizens. At the city level, it would involve civic control over urban planning policies, which implies its orientation towards the public interest in opposition to its orientation towards the interests of particular groups. But then again, the capitalist society produces inequalities and those who have more economical resources have a wider range of choice on where and how they want to live. Land, equipments and services are there to be bought by those who can afford them and the less well-off inhabitants have to settle for less. It is also possible that networks of influence with local and national authorities may privilege the interests of some individuals and groups over the others, thus disturbing the so desired urban civic control.

Considering the facts, the right to the city can be viewed as a way to correct the inequalities of the capitalist system. This means that it must be enjoyed differently by diverse individuals and groups: to contradict the dominance of some, it must favour the others. In a more radical perspective, like Lefebvre suggests, it should entail an alteration of the political system itself, away from capitalism and into socialism. Only then inequalities would be

corrected at their origin. The right to the city can thus be viewed as a stepping stone into socialism, or a palliative for capitalism.

3. Spatial Justice

Whatever the approach to the right to the city – revolutionary or reformist – to situate it in the democratic context implies some notion of social justice, insofar as it constitutes a dimension of the quality of democracy that can be furthered through a spatial approach, thus leading to the much debated concept of spatial justice. As we have seen, the right to the city may discriminate positively its most dispossessed and disadvantaged inhabitants, so that the city becomes more responsive to all its inhabitants: it can correct inequalities and as such promote social justice. Soja (2009) regards spatial justice as more than just a category included in the wider concept of social justice, it is a central concept in itself since it emphasizes the impact of the geographical dimension in the production and reproduction of (in)justice. Spatial discrimination is generated by the biases imposed on certain populations due to their geographical location and it is critical in the production of spatial injustice by the creation of long lasting spatial structures of privilege.

In this perspective, the political organization of the space in a capitalist society often leads to an unequal and discriminatory distribution of the results of urbanization that can be contradicted by a fair and balanced distribution in space of socially valued resources and the opportunity to use them. There is a dialectic relation between the spatial and social dimensions that reciprocally influence each other: if the space is socially produced then it can be socially modified. The space is conceived as an active force that influences the human existence at various levels - economical, artistic, environmental, social. To adopt a spatial approach to justice enlarges the theoretical understanding of the causal factors that determine it. To combine the terms spatial and justice opens a new range of possibilities for political and social action, as well as social theorizing and empirical analysis, that would not be so incentivized if the two terms were not used together.

For Marcuse (2014) the right to the city is regarded as a common cause that mobilizes alienated social groups in the rejection of profit for other forms of solidarity and as such it should aim for the deprived, exploited, impoverished, discontent. The spatial dimension emerges as just one of many causes that contribute to worsen the city's problems, whose origins are structural and lie in wider societal arenas. The spatial question is therefore essentially derivative and must be integrated in a wider social context, but on the other hand social injustices also have a spatial dimension. Spatial injustice is essentially due to the involuntary confinement of alienated groups and to an unequal distribution in space of resources. Its correction depends on the alteration of historically situated social, political and economical conditions, since spatial remedies are necessary but not enough to contradict injustice in the city.

4. The rebel way

In a neomarxist perspective, Harvey (2012) views capitalism as a feral monopolistic, predatory and standardizing system that must be challenged in the city, taken in a broad sense, which bursts with social inequalities but also with revolutionary potential. The traditional proletariat is obsolete in contemporary occidental society and the rallying cry of the disposed emerges in new and dynamic urban social groups, such as the occupy movement in New York, strongly repressed by the capitalist forces who fully understand the threat it represents.

These heterogeneous groups are not concentrated in factories and their dispersive nature places organizational challenges to the traditional left, that must overcome its reluctance in accepting a new reality and consequently merge the new social movements with classist work based organizations. Left wing parties and syndicates must join efforts with locally based transversal forces that gather different groups from several sectors in a common struggle, thus constituting a new political force in the city, a city-wide anti-capitalist movement capable of organizing production, distribution and consumption for the benefit of all the people, instead of privileging just a few. Such a coalition would demand for a joint

effort from the forces of culture and political radical tradition, which must mobilize citizens beyond class interests.

For several realities there are various possible strategies and it is possible for the capitalist structure to be challenged from within without a revolutionary transition. However, it is demanding for alternative organizations, such as associations and cooperatives, to maintain their integrity in a competitive capitalist system that entails exploitation practices. On the other hand, to create an isolated socialist city in a capitalist environment would certainly generate intense repression. As an alternative, some cities, such as Porto Alegre, have managed to implement transforming democratizing measures, as the participative budget, that can contribute to deepen urban democracy without generating much opposition and can be exported to other contexts.

Nevertheless, according to Harvey, the consolidation of urban rebellions demands for intervention at a higher level of global coordination, the level of the system that embeds all states. Otherwise, state level reformism will simply reconstitute neoliberalism. Urban networks are crucial in such a movement, networks that are democratic, egalitarian and solidarious in their struggle against class dominated capitalism. In his view, the starting point for the revolutionary process resides then in the reinvention and reorganization of cities for anti-capitalist struggle, which implies alternative forms of urbanization, that remains a mean for the absorption of capital and labour surpluses in a highly speculative capitalist environment.

5. Use or abuse

As we have seen, the concept of the right to the city emerges as a response to injustices perceived in the capitalist system. In a highly competitive and individualist environment dominated by private property entitlements and free markets, the classic conflict liberty *versus* equality is prompted by phenomena of exploitation and dispossession. An unequal distribution in space of valued resources and the opportunity to use them deepens as disparities in income increase and networks of privilege pull their strings in the backgrounds

of urbanization processes. The access to housing, equipments and infrastructures is conditioned by one's capacity to acquire them in the market, for they are scarce goods that are not available to everyone. The neoliberal ideal of the self made deserving man that conquers his rights by his own personal effort imposes itself more and more in contemporary democracies. Using austerity as an argument, it justifies the withdrawal of compensation mechanisms, such as the ones entailed in a redistributive social state, thus reinforcing inequalities.

Alternatives are presented under the right to the city conceptualization, some revolutionary, others reformist, but they all have in common the concern with a decline in democratic quality that results from the decrease of civic control over urbanization processes. Harvey's radical cry for revolutionary action generates controversy given its strong connection to a Marxist theoretical approach that may be regarded as obsolete. Such is the understanding of Souza (2010), which criticizes Harvey for his attachment to what he regards as a reductionist, centralistic and prejudiced Marxism that undermines his understanding of the complexity of contemporary social movements, which are wrongfully accused of being so involved in local action that they fail to see the big picture. From a left libertarian point of view, Sousa deplors Harvey's attachment to hierarchies and refuses any pretention to a socialist state. Instead, he proposes free association and horizontal networks as strategies against oppression by class exploitation, but also by a centralized, hierarchical state. In this perspective, institutional struggle is just a supplement for a broader direct action that demands for a pragmatic relation with the state, therefore preventing appropriation and sectarianism.

As Lefebvre recognized, the political utility of the right to the city concept depends on its usefulness as a tool that assists us in experimenting with reality. Whatever the perspective – revolutionary or reformist; vertical or horizontal - the right to the city, both in its theoretical assumption and as a rallying cry for urban social movements, is challenged by the risk of trivialization of Lefebvre's initial concept. Once it is appropriated by a large spectrum of actors, from local to national authorities, from NGOs to social movements, it may become detached from its original meaning, a common phenomenon that affects many concepts, including the one of democracy. Another concern resides in the particularism of the actors

who mobilize for this right. One of the main challenges to the right to the city is the extent to which social actors can move beyond their own interests and embrace a common global struggle that can effectively produce a better democracy for all. Finally, there remains a risk of cooptation by actors who intent to «domesticate» the concept, thus neutralizing its transformative potential. As «The Leopard» well taught us, sometimes «something has to change, so that everything remains the same».

But the challenges to the right to the city are yet not exhausted. Another fundamental aspect to consider is the applicability of the concept to different geographies, for concepts drafted in the western academia naturally reflect a very specific understanding of reality that emerges in emblematic contexts, which cannot be simply extrapolated to other scenarios without considering particular causal relations. Paris and Chicago are not Cairo or Mumbai, so to which point a conceptual framework drafted considering one can be applied to the other is a pertinent matter to bear in mind.

Ananya Roy (2009) challenges researchers to rethink their list of big cities and to look beyond generalist and prejudiced assumptions of third world underdeveloped urban realities that must be regulated and corrected under the framework of the western ideal model. She boldly suggests dislocating the western centre of theoretical production to the global south in order to generate alternative analytical readings and thus overcome current epistemological limits. Concepts are geographically grounded and may be more or less susceptible to generalization, but opening up the geographies in which they are produced enriches the theoretical universe available to any researcher in search of the most adequate conceptual tools.

Cities like Lisbon, Oporto or Setubal, who are in the periphery of the centre, face the risk of remaining virtually unnoticed unless they also reclaim their analytical territory, thus becoming active contributors to knowledge production on the metropolis. Portugal provides an interesting case study. It inaugurated the third wave of democratic transitions with a revolutionary transition to democracy in the mid seventies, which was followed by an intense migratory flow from the former colonies. Prior to that, from the mid twentieth century, people from all over the countryside had been moving to the main city areas in search for work opportunities in the industrial sector. Unable to access the housing market

with their meagre wages, they resorted to numerous shanty towns to which the authorities turned a blind eye. When the April 1974 revolution arose, about 25% of the population living in continental Portugal resided in homes deprived of any criteria of privacy, safety and comfort. In about two and a half million households, 67% had no toilet facilities, 60% were not served by the sewerage system, 53% had no electricity and 52% had no water supply. The housing shortage was estimated at about 600 000 households (Bandeirinha, 2007: 68).

All these fluxes of people and housing shortages had to be managed and accommodated. During the revolutionary period intense popular movements arose around the right to housing and innovative responses emerged, such as the Ambulatory Local Service (SAAL), which comprised an intense participatory approach. These experiences provide interesting case studies and can certainly raise pertinent concerns and contribute to the theoretical debate around the right to the city, which remains a useful concept to analyze capitalist urbanization as long as the concerns identified are properly considered and adjusted to the national reality. More ambitiously, it can constitute a starting point from which new concepts, practices and ideas can be forget and generalized, so that scholars and practitioners in other geographies may profit from the Portuguese experience.

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