

## The Right to the Creative City – talk

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The phrase “right to the city” came out of a particular historical situation. In broad terms, it was a period of sustained economic prosperity, but one not shared by all. That contradiction became more and more apparent: for the first time, it seemed, the possibility of enough, even plenty, for all, was a historical possibility immediately within reach. But it seemed to require a radical reorganization of society, a revolution, to achieve. That view was widespread among two sections of society: those excluded from the plenty all around them, discriminated against, left in poverty, oppressed and exploited: the deprived, and by the discontented, those who were alienated with things as they were, who saw a real possibility for a system in which all were not only included but supported socially, economically, culturally, politically, in developing their own capabilities, their own humanity, their own creativity. Henri Lefebvre coined the phrase “right to the city” in the midst of the unrest in Paris in 1968, seeing it as an assertion of a justified claim to such a radically reorganized society, as a cry of the deprived and a demand of the discontent, the alienated. The two came together on the streets of Paris: the cry of the workers and the demand of the students, emblematically. The pattern emerged around the world: in the occupation of Columbia University, for instance. Students, led by Students for a Democratic Society, occupied one building, while Black students, many from Harlem, occupied another; the discontent and the deprived, the alienated and the excluded, coming together in one set of radical demands.

The right to the city was, for Lefebvre, not simply a demand relating to the geographical entity the city, but the city was seen as a synecdoche for society as a whole, as it could be, an urban and urbane and, if you will, creative society. In Lefebvre’s sense, calling it the right to the creative city would be entirely appropriate. Lefebvre himself describes the right to the city as

a superior form of rights: rights to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habitat and to inhabit. The right to the oeuvre [the product of human activity], to participation and appropriation (clearly distinct from the right to property), are implied in the right to the city.<sup>1</sup>

In practice, the right to the city has become a rallying slogan for radical movements of a very diverse nature widely combining elements of many forms of the demand for change, in the economic, the political, the social, the cultural, the political spheres. The core concerns of all of them combine demands for justice in the production and distribution of material goods with the demands for freedom and support for cultural, intellectual, social, sexual, emotional freedom. Right to the city alliances in practice are typically made up of groups like trade unions, workers centers, minority racial and ethnic groups, LGBT groups, welfare recipients, social housing tenants, as well as students, academics, artists, environmentalists, lawyers, peaceniks.<sup>2</sup> The danger of cooptation is ever present, reducing the radical cry and demand for social change to a request for separate individual rights of inclusion into existing structures; more on this later, if time permits.

So: To what kind of city does the right to the city have reference?

We must start with the fact that it will not be the existing city, or more of the same. It will not be the city that produces One-Dimensional people, not a city that restrains the basic human instincts of love, the desires for self-expression, for adventure and experience, for pleasure, for happiness.<sup>3</sup> It is not for a city that, on the one hand, leaves a large portion of its residents with less than the basic material needs for a decent and healthy life: leaves many homeless, undernourished, in bad health and with inadequate care, in polluted environments, congested cities, insecure neighborhoods, subject to the domination and exploitation of their labor power and the restriction of their freedoms to speak to act, to assemble, to develop—residents deprived of even the rudiments of a decent life.

And it is not for a city that leaves many others alienated, discontented, in a society with a consumer culture in which creativity is channeled into winning war games on the internet, and indeed into winning wars in foreign countries, finding more ways to spend money on gold watches and pleasure yachts and houses expressing status rather than comfort, bought with more of a view to exchange than to use. It is not for a city

that limits the future expectations of many, leaves them in unfulfilling jobs, constrains their opportunities, regulates their personal lives, dominates how they spend their time and for what purpose. It creates discontent as well as deprivation.

So then what kind of a city does the right to the city positively envision? There are many formulations its alternative world. Karl Marx formulated it as a society in which the full development of each is conditional on the full development of all, and the development of all is conditional on the full development of each. David Harvey quotes Robert Park as speaking of “the city of heart’s desire,” and elsewhere, a city “appropriate for the human species.”<sup>4</sup> Such a city requires the preservation of the concept and potential achievability of a utopia, a “city on the hill,” in the religious formulation.<sup>5</sup> And calling that which is desired “the creative city” is not a bad two-word description.

So how do we get to such a city? Who has an interest in it, who will bring it about??

The answer rests on a political and economic analysis of why the existing city is as it is. Lefebvre is explicit in his formulation of what is restricting these human aspirations in the existing city; he says “limiting the world of commodities” is essential if there is to be change. Lef 2006 or 9, (1966) p. 148.. We have put it this way:

A genuine right to the city requires the abolition of the rule of private finance, and thus with it the rule of private capital, over the urban economy, and indeed over the world economy as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

Who will have the right to such a city? To start with, specifically NOT just one class, certainly not just the right of Richard Florida’s so-called creative class, but the right of all people, all residents of the city, all members of the society. It is the right of all to be supported in their development of their creative faculties, their human potential. Florida’s understanding of creativity is a pernicious one.<sup>7</sup> Creativity becomes an action divorced from its end; it becomes equivalent to innovation, no matter of what, no matter why, no matter with what result, constructive or destructive. Florida’s definition of the creative class includes anyone with a PhD, no matter how hopelessly pedantic or stultifying their research and teaching; it includes stock brokers and hedge fund managers devising new forms of financial instruments, credit default swaps, derivatives, the securitization of subprime mortgage loans that have led to millions of foreclosures and evictions. It includes engineering geniuses that develop nuclear weapons with the potential to eradicate all of mankind. It enshrines creative marketing ploys and manipulation by media that produce the consumer culture that sees creativity in selling more and more products, no matter whether they satisfy real needs or wants or not.

It can indeed be argued that Florida’s “Creative Class” is a good part of what stands in the way of achieving a creative city for all. For it is not their rights that are meant when we speak of the right to a creative city; many of their rights in fact stand in the way of achieving that right for the large majority of others. For many in his misbegotten definition of the creative class are in fact the technicians and executors of the existing city and the commodified practices that stifle creativity. The right to the creative city precludes rights to dominate and exploit, to control and constrain, no matter how innovative – how ‘creative’ the means are.

The right to the city is a moral and political claim, and as such it is a claim against, as well as a claim for. Pursuing the right to the city will necessarily involve conflict. It cannot be achieved by consensus, at least in the short run; those claiming the right to the city must be prepared for disagreements, for conflicts of interest, for challenges to their ideas of justice and fairness and equity, and how to achieve them. In fact, establishing the right of the city involves restricting some rights to protect others. Conflict is inevitable. And in fact it will be many of the members of RF’s misbegotten Creative Class that will be opposing these rights, that stand in the way of their achievement. But I believe such restrictions can be morally justified, that morality of the claim the goal of a creative city can be objectively grounded.

The justification for the morality of the claim begins with a worldview, a view of the nature of man and what being human is and means that it is of the nature of man to wish to develop, to grow, to expand his

capabilities, to flex his muscles, to love and to create as well as to procreate. That world view can be grounded in scientific analysis of the instinctual structure of human beings, of what follows inevitably from the basic physical drive for survival of the species or it can have a religious foundation, or it can simply be accepted as what all people would really want if they were asked, perhaps behind a veil of ignorance, as John Rawls has defined justice., perhaps if they were freed of the manipulation and constraints that attempts to reduce them from rounded full-dimensional human being to one-dimensional ones.

So I believe that the need to change the existing city has a compelling moral foundation. And it is a moral and political and SOCIAL claim, not an individual claim, although it subsumes individual<sup>8</sup> claims also. It is not (only) a right of individuals to be asserted in courts of law within the existing society,<sup>9</sup> but a right of all people, as human beings, to the production of a different society, a different city: a creative city. It is thus a call for collective political action that includes multiple rights – the right to shelter, to clothing, to nourishment, to health, education, etc., but it goes beyond that. It is a claim to an organization of society that will provide those basic rights, but that will provide them as part of an effort to nourish human development , growth, creativity, for all.

The distinction between individual rights and this social right is important because often the right to the city is diminished or distorted or coopted into a much less comprehensive, much less radical, claim: simply the extension of one or another particular right now existing and available for some, on an equal basis for others. So we have Charters of Rights, or Declarations of Rights, that hope to incorporate these individual rights into existing law, within existing systems of justice, within existing distributions of wealth, within existing relations of economic and political and social power.<sup>10</sup> But that's not enough. The "right" in the demand for the right to the city is a right to a different organization of society that will make these individual rights redundant, unnecessary, because parts of the very fabric of society.<sup>11</sup>

And how does the concept of creativity, of the creative city, relate to the Social right to the city? What would a creative city look like?

It would not be simply the existing city with a little more creativity introduced for the limited enjoyment of some, but one that promotes the creativity of all of the city's residents (although adding even a little more creative possibilities even for just a few more deprived of it would be a good thing too.) A creative city is rather one in which creativity is a part of every-day life for all. Creativity in the sense of art, certainly: to make all, and not just one class, have the experience of art, to have a shared and enriched ability to appreciate the beauties and wonders of life, to glimpse what could be as well as what is. But art in its accepted sense does not exhaust the desire, the need, to be creative. Creativity can be exercised by all manner of means, in all manner of forums, in all kinds of tasks, as a part of any work. Full and effective participation in the decisions that determine one's own life is an exercise of creativity, in a sense creating one's own life, not have it forced on one , determined from the outside and through means over which one has no control.

Thus democracy, I would argue, is a necessary part of a creative city; the right to participate actively in determining the direction of society, including of course the shaping of cities and the activities that go on within them. Interaction with others, a social life free of prejudices and phobias and rigid preconceptions, a city with places where all can benefit from a creative diversity of people, genders, ethnicities, occupations, interests, opportunities, a city that lets one flex one's creative muscles as the existing city does not. What more creative activity could one imagine that the creation of a better society?

Creativity is not a matter of one particular life-style, as Richard Florida would sometimes have it, but of the ability to create one's own life as one wishes and imagines it, in a supportive city and society..And the creative city has economic implications as well, for if one is deprived of the security of having one's minimal life needs satisfied, the aspiration for creativity will be utopian indeed. The needs of the deprived must be met just as the aspirations of the discontented are met, for creativity to flourish. Economic justice is a condition the right to a creative city to have meaning. And justice not only in the distribution of goods and services, but also in their production. There is no way a worker routinely repeating the same motions over and over on an assembly line can feel him or herself to be creative, but participating the decisions as to what

is produced on that line can justify part of the routine work.<sup>12</sup> The more routine and unrewarding any work is in itself, the more highly it should be paid; garbage collectors deserve wages high enough to permit them to enjoy creative lives outside of their ever-day jobs.

Do those in the creative community have any particular role to play in the struggle for such a creative city? I am a little leery of the term “creative community,” or indeed the narrow sense of “creative” as denoting only those broadly in the arts. Creativity is form of action and of thinking, that is shared by many people outside as well as inside the arts. The goal of our actions ought to be to move towards a society which is as a whole a creative community. When we speak of a creative city, we mean it, I think, in this broad sense; we are not talking about a city in which every resident is, in the narrow sense, an artist, but in which creativity is nourished in all its members, in all work, whether in the arts or not.

But we want to focus on artists, or those concerned principally with the arts, the arts in the broadest sense, visual arts, writers, dancers, actors, musicians, theorists of the arts, those who are already privileged to use their creative talents and are committed to creativity as a matter of substance and principle, recognizing creativity as perhaps the most ultimately desirable attribute of a truly human life.

How can artists contribute to implementing the right to a creative city? In two ways. One is as artists, through the critical content of art, showing alternatives, making connections, opening eyes, provoking thought and inspiring action—artists as artists. Art is inherently critical. It inherently exposes its audience to a different view of the world around them, opens alternative vistas, ways of seeing, hearing understanding. It is inherently in contrast to the existing reality, interpreting it, molding it digging into it, showing what it is not in contrast to what it could be. The ways it does that are the subject matter of aesthetic theory, and beyond not only my time here but also my competence. But it is something that is relevant to all persons in society, not only to museum curators and rich patrons and institutions. Public art is again a separate and big subject, but in its use in our cities it is often a political matter. When Richard Serra’s Tilted Arc is put in the public plaza before the Federal Building in New York City and blocks, with its immense stainless steel form, the most convenient entry into that building, it can be read as a comment on what happens in that building, or on how public space should be used, or on the value of art, and who it should serve and who should make decisions about it. When a poor and predominantly African-American community objects to a publicly placed statue by a white artist intended to reflect its power by showing a half-naked powerfully-built black man, there is a debate in which artists need to be involved, as artists, seeking a creative response to an important social problem. Art as the *promesse de bonheur* is itself a contribution to the campaign for the right to the creative city. What artists produce is, first and foremost, not a commodity, but its opposite; something produced for enjoyment, for illumination, for the enrichment of life, not for exchange, and without the exploitation of others or serving the purposes of profit.

The second way that artists can contribute to achieving a creative city is as citizens. Artists are, after all, citizens also, inherently if not always sufficiently legally. As citizens with a special competence they can teach, or volunteer. Exploring the role, the quality, the location, the forms, of graffiti – the artistic use of public space and surfaces, perhaps? Serving on design review boards. Testifying at public hearings on matters of architectural quality.

But then most artists, as citizens, also have a particular class identity – not the creative class of Florida’s technicians or hedge fund managers, but rather at the opposite end of the class hierarchy: struggling to make ends meet, fighting exploitation of their talents for purposes of profit, constantly defending their freedom from stultifying social restraints. They have experience, as citizens, of misunderstanding, of discrimination, of intolerance of difference; they can join with others facing discrimination to expand diversity and openness to difference. And they can join with others who are similarly positioned on a wide variety of critical social issues played out in the city. I teach urban planning and the single measure that I believe those purporting to plan a creative city welcoming to the arts can do is a very ordinary one, but a very controversial one: rent control. The cost of space in which to work, the cost of living while in the throes of the artistic creative process, is a major deterrent to the production of art; holding the costs of housing down, which is within the power of cities everywhere, would be a major contribution to implementing a right to a creative city—

making it, to begin with, an affordable city, even for those who do not wish to devote their major efforts to the enhancement of their incomes. More generally, any actions that result in determining the uses of land in the city according to social rather than market priorities is a move towards a more creative city.

A final warning note: just as the right to the city concept has been coopted, de-radicalized, turned into a pragmatic incrementalism, so have the value placed on creativity in the artistic and cultural sense been turned into a non-controversial pabulum in the service of profitability within the existing city. The presence of artists, Richard Florida argues enhances the competitiveness of cities (although his definition of creatives is broader, his life-style definition is significantly based on a stereotyped view of the creative as bohemian artist), and more serious scholars have convincingly argued that artists do indeed contribute to the economic life of their communities.<sup>13</sup> But arguing for the support of artists because they contribute to economic growth seems to me precisely backwards. Economic growth of a city should be valued because it contributes to the creativity of its members, not the other way around. Growth for its own sake is more likely to defeat the right to creative city than to enhance its chances. Artists may need to stress their contribution as an economic one in today's political climate, but they should see that contribution as a generally desirable but incidental side-effect of their work, not its purpose. Art should not be instrumentalized in the service of economic growth.

I probably don't need to tell any of you all of this; it's really pretty simple. The problem is not to know it, but to act on it.

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<sup>1</sup> Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, p. 174.

<sup>2</sup> The national Right to the City is not the only group that has formed round such a coalition; National People's Action is very similar in many regards, and even broader, or less radical, groups along the same lines, such as Uncut in the United Kingdom, Build the Dream in the United States, even MoveOn, are seeking to fill a similar need. Even the tea parties respond to some degree to the same developments that produced the Right to the City; see Marcuse, Peter. 2010. "The Need for Critical Theory in Everyday Life: Why the Tea Parties Have Popular Support." *CITY*, vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 355-370, August

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* and *Eros and Civilization*.

<sup>4</sup> Harvey 1976 314.

<sup>5</sup> But see my "Reading Harvey on the tarmac with Jesus"

<sup>6</sup> Intro p. 8 Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer.

<sup>7</sup> Ann Markusen has written a truly excellent dissection of Florida's concept of the creative class, and she has spelled out what a real attempt to support artistic creativity might be in urban terms, in Markusen, Ann. 2006. "Urban development and the politics of a creative class: evidence from a study of artists." *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 38, pp. 1921-1940. See also Jamie Peck's.

<sup>8</sup> Lefebvre uses the term *inhabitants*; it suggests both the relationship to the city, and is broader than *citizen*, for it clearly includes immigrants, non-citizens, as well as those recognized at law as citizens. See Genevieve Acio, Clara Irazabal, and Laura Pulido, "Right to the Suburb? Rethinking Lefebvre and Immigrant Activism." *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 2011, pp. 1-14.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the relationship of Lefebvre's concept to legally enforceable rights, with the example of Brazil which has specific reference to the right to the city in its City Statute of 2001, see Edesio Fernandes, 2007, *Constructing the Right to the City in Brazil*, *Social & Legal Studies*, vol. 16, 201-219.

<sup>10</sup> See Marcuse, Peter, "Rights in Cities and the Right to the City?" in Ana Sugranyes and Charlotte Mathivet (editors), 2010, *Cities for All: Proposals and Experiences towards the Right to the City*, Habitat International Coalition, Santiago, Chile, pp. 87-98, also available at <http://www.hic-net.org/content/Cities%20for%20All-ENG.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> See Margit Mayer on the processes of cooptation, in *Cities for People*.

<sup>12</sup> See Richard Sennett. Creativity might thus be taken as the exact opposite of what Karl Marx meant by alienation, creative labor as the opposite of alienated labor.

<sup>13</sup> For a sensible view of this issue, see Markusen, *supra*.