Introduction

One of the most compelling and influential elements of Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space is his portrait of abstract space as the mode of spatial production generated by contemporary capitalism. Despite the apparent ubiquity of a constellation of abstract spatial tendencies towards homogeneity, fragmentation and hierarchical ordering, Lefebvre is adamant that abstract space never achieves absolute dominance. As much as it ‘relates negatively’ towards the alternative forms of spatial production that it harbours, it can never totally suppress or resolve the contradictions that engender them (Lefebvre 1991: 50). Lefebvre describes this new potential mode of spatialisation as ‘differential space’ – a space oriented towards appropriation rather than domination. The central means that Lefebvre envisages for the political assertion of differential space is the ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre 1996; Leary-Owhin 2016). There is now an extensive secondary literature which has considered both these aspects of Lefebvre’s thought, but in fields such as socio-legal studies and the interdisciplinary field of law and geography, his conceptualisation of the right to the city has largely been subsumed within a positivist and bureaucratically reformist agenda, which inevitably obscures and undermines its most radical implications. In this chapter I will suggest that an alternative to such anodyne formulations lies in a rethinking of the relationships between abstraction, appropriation and utopia. It is only through viewing the right to the city as a demand for the political and aesthetic appropriation of space, which rejects both the violent abstractions of juridification and the moralistic repudiation of abstraction per se, that we may glimpse how this concept can be harnessed in struggles which challenge the artificial boundaries between the possible and the impossible.

I will begin with Lefebvre’s account of abstract space as the dominant mode of spatial production within contemporary capitalism and highlight an alternative form of differential space, which he envisages as emerging from within the contradictions of abstract space. While abstract space is the product of technologies and practices which are focused on the domination of space and the extraction of exchange value, differential space is oriented towards the appropriation of spatial uses and points towards the possibility of restoring the relationships between the body and its space. Lefebvre understands the transition to differential space as a political struggle which depends on the right to the city as a radical demand for the creative appropriation
of space. But in charting this transition, it is important to avoid establishing a rigid dichotomy between appropriation and abstraction. The right to the city is best understood as a means of navigating through these two poles of social practice – linking emancipatory forms of praxis to alternative models of social organisation. In this way, differential space can be understood, not as an abstract utopia, disconnected from everyday life, but as a concrete utopia which transforms previously fixed social relations and networks of power.

The emergence of differential space

A widely discussed element of Lefebvre’s classic work *The Production of Space* is a history of spatial modes of production, in which he charts both the gradual development of the abstract space that defines contemporary capitalism, and the contradictions which this form of space harbours. In Lefebvre’s account, a crucial moment in the passage to abstract space was a shift from the ‘metaphysical closure’ of the Greek civil order to the novel forms of secular difference and relativity that characterised the Roman city-state (Lefebvre 1991: 239). But this breakdown of the ‘internal unity’ of form, function and structure in ancient Greece was accompanied by new manifestations of authority, such as the legal codification of private land ownership and the rise of patriarchal social relations, which subordinated space ‘to the unifying but abstract principle of property’ (Lefebvre 1991: 252) and effectively ‘promoted abstraction to the rank of a law of thought’ (Lefebvre 1991: 243). In this sense, while the organisation of space in Rome opened up greater possibilities for diversity, Lefebvre is quite explicit in his characterisation of this city as a ‘space of power’ (Lefebvre 1991: 244–245), which provided a crucial juridico-political framework for the development and consolidation of an abstract mode of spatial production from the late Middle Ages through to the turn of the 20th century. While processes of primitive accumulation are obviously of critical importance here, Lefebvre is also insistent that the introduction of the juridical relations of private property over the entirety of physical space and the law’s imposition of the contractual form over customary relationships were essential elements in the rise of abstract space (Lefebvre 1991: 263; Cunningham 2008: 455–456). The Roman world:

introduced a conception of space the characteristics of which would continue to manifest themselves in later times: the dissociation of component elements... subordination to the unifying, but abstract principle of property; and the incorporation into space of this same principle, which is in itself impossible to live... because it is juridical in nature, and hence external... to ‘lived experience’.

(Lefebvre 1991: 252)

In Lefebvre’s account, abstract space has reached its apogee with the development of contemporary capitalist social relations and is characterised by tendencies towards the fragmentation, homogenisation and hierarchical ordering of space (Lefebvre 2003a: 210; Lefebvre 1976; Martins 1982: 177–178). The fragmentation of space is manifest in its physical division into privatised lots and the submission of these parcels of space to both commodification and the intellectual divisions imposed by the specialist technologies of intellectual disciplines such as economics, law, geography, sociology, planning and architecture. A second tendency that Lefebvre attributes to abstract space is the drive towards homogenisation, which is facilitated by both the flattening out of the diversity of uses through the commodification of space and the expansion of technical capacities for quantification and measurement (Martins 1982: 177). While abstract space is certainly not homogeneous in absolute terms, Lefebvre regards it as having ‘homogeneity as its goal, its orientation, its “lens”’ (Lefebvre 1991: 287). These tendencies are not opposed, but mutually
reinforce each other and are supplemented by a third orientation – towards the hierarchical ordering of space by dominant economic, technological and administrative powers. This stratified ordering of space is a strategic endeavour pursued by the combined forces of juridical and political institutions and processes of capital accumulation. One of Lefebvre’s primary examples here is the spatial contradiction between the urban centre and its peripheral spaces, through which the centre organises that which is ‘around it, arranging and hierarchising the peripheries’ (Lefebvre 1976: 17).

Lefebvre argues that it is through abstract space’s tendencies towards fragmentation, homogeneity and hierarchy that capitalist social relations have been able to entrench and reproduce themselves within everyday life (Lefebvre 1976: 21; Wilson 2013). While liberal capitalist societies are usually presented as embodying normative attachments to civil order, political consensus and a social compact based on a commitment to non-violence, the production of abstract space also depends on economic, social and juridico-political processes which are inherently coercive. This is particularly so in relation to the forms of violence which are inflicted on the body, and are characteristic of what Lefebvre, perhaps polemically, depicts as ‘a violence intrinsic to abstraction’ (Lefebvre 1991: 289).

While the brutal and violent tendencies that are inherent to abstract space are a central focus of Lefebvre’s narrative in *The Production of Space*, he also makes clear that there are cracks in the façade. Abstract space is of course a project that is never entirely accomplished, but is constantly confronted by contradictions which undermine naïve presumptions about its totalising capacity to eliminate alternative spatial possibilities. In this context, Lefebvre identifies the potential of a post-capitalist mode of spatial production, which he characterises as ‘differential space’ (Lefebvre 1991: 50). This form of space encompasses physical, mental and social uses which nurture differences and particularities, and it holds out the prospect of a restoration of unity to the ‘functions, elements and moments of social practice’ that are fractured by abstract space (Lefebvre 1991: 52). In this sense, differential space emerges from the contradictions that cannot be suppressed by abstract space’s tendencies towards homogeneity, fragmentation and hierarchy.

A crucial aspect of Lefebvre’s argument is that, whereas abstract space is founded on the domination of nature and of the body, differential space is oriented towards ‘appropriation’. This distinction between the ‘appropriation’ and ‘domination’ of space is one that Lefebvre suggests was not sufficiently clarified by Marx and led many of his followers throughout the 20th century to endorse a Promethean view of humanity’s productivist mastery over material nature (Lefebvre 1991: 165; but see Burkett 1999; Foster 2000). For Lefebvre, this focus on the role of appropriation in defining differential space is not just a rhetorical matter but reveals the necessity of the appropriation of the body – its rhythms, practices and symbols – in any challenge to the dominance (and the dominating logics) of abstract space. Accordingly, the production of differential space requires the restoration of the relationship between the body (as a deployment of energy) and its own space (Lefebvre 1991: 170). This of course leads us to the fact that the production of differential space is a political project, which relies upon the active agency of the inhabitants of space. Lefebvre depicts this project as a massive intervention of personal and collective uses of space which points:

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  towards the space of a different (social) life and of a different mode of production… [and]
  staddles the breach between science and utopia, reality and ideality, conceived and lived.
  It aspires to surmount these oppositions by exploring the dialectical relationship between
  ‘possible’ and ‘impossible’.

(Lefebvre 1991: 60)

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The contours of the right to the city

The most prominent social and political form through which Lefebvre envisages that the appropriation of differential space may be pursued is what he refers to as the right to the city or the right to urban space (Lefebvre 1996). This concept is one that Lefebvre introduced in the context of the revolutionary events of May ’68 and was further developed through his later collaborative work with the Group de Navarrenx (Lefebvre 1990; 2003b). In recent years the right to the city has become his most well-known contribution to transdisciplinary debates within politics, law and urban studies (Attoh 2011; Butler 2009, 2012; Dikey and Gilbert 2002; Fernandes 2007; Gilbert and Dikey 2008; Harvey 2008; Lebas 1996; Marcuse 2009; Mayer 2009; Merrifield 2011; Mitchell 2003; Purcell 2002, 2008, 2013, 2014; Souza 2010; Wall 2012). Indeed, there has been a somewhat surprising recognition and adoption of the terminology of the right to the city within mainstream policy development, and it has become the subject of a voluminous literature which includes both advocacy for the broadening of access to urban services and proposals for expanding mechanisms of participation in urban decision-making (Brown and Kristiansen 2009; Cities Alliance 2010; Coggin and Pieterse 2012; HABITAT III 2016; UNESCO 2006; UN-HABITAT 2010).

In Lefebvre’s original formulation, the right to the city is put forward as an assertion of the entitlement of all urban inhabitants to collaborate in the collective and creative appropriation of space and its use values, over its domination by capital, exchange value and the technocratic expertise of state bureaucracies (Lefebvre 1996; 2003b). This draws out Lefebvre’s longstanding interest in the necessity of emancipatory political tendencies being generated by the self-management or autogestion of space, rather than relying on the institutions and systems of the liberal capitalist state to act as a guardian of the public interest (Lefebvre 1991: 383; Lefebvre 2009; Rose 1978). Indeed, autogestion is understood by Lefebvre as a direct confrontation with the state’s roles in the organisation, control and policing of space. As he makes clear in an essay written prior to his mature writings on both the politics of space and the character of contemporary state power:

The principal contradiction that autogestion introduces and stimulates is its own contradiction with the State. In essence, autogestion calls the State into question as a constraining force erected above society as a whole, capturing and demanding the rationality that is inherent to social relations (to social practice)… it cannot escape this brutal obligation: to constitute itself as a power which is not that of the State.

(Lefebvre 2009: 147, emphasis in original)

Given the philosophical and political origins of this concept, it seems curious at first glance to recognise how widely the right to the city has been adopted within an increasing range of contexts, including scholarship and policy-making around urban governance and service provision which operate at some distance from the radical vision of this right in Lefebvre’s writings. While in one sense this explosion of interest in the right to the city is encouraging, it is also indicative of a widespread tendency to co-opt, institutionalise and, in some cases, to legally codify the right to the city, in order to position it as yet one more addition to a long list of orthodox liberal human rights claims (Brown and Kristiansen 2009; Coggin and Pieterse 2012). While these associations of the right to the city with a broadly social liberal, distributive agenda have gained strength within mainstream scholarship and policy discourse, they have largely sidestepped or obscured the full philosophical implications of Lefebvre’s original idea.

A prominent instance of this can be observed in Don Mitchell’s widely read (and otherwise laudable) attempt to invoke the right to the city in the service of a radical democratisation of
public space and resistance to the coercive spatial ordering that has been imposed by neoliberal urbanisation (Mitchell 2003). Despite an explicit commitment to a transformative political agenda, Mitchell tends to cast the right to the city narrowly, as a symbolic category for the gradual enhancement of a set of orthodox social and economic rights (such as the right to housing and the right to free speech) that are contested in an urban setting (Wall 2012: 140). Another more recent example can be seen in Edward Soja’s *Seeking Spatial Justice*, where he laments the degree to which Lefebvre’s explicitly spatial orientation and his radical political objectives have been absorbed into a weakly defined, policy-oriented, liberal version of municipal rights (Soja 2010: 107). But as David Cunningham points out, Soja’s own attempt to generate a ‘justice politics’ is linked to this increasingly popular usage of the right to the city, which ‘all-too-easily oscillates between… reformist or even essentially conservative/nostalgic modalities, and… future oriented, “progressive” ones’, and leaves Soja’s project constantly in danger of lapsing into a nebulous, left-liberal reformism (Cunningham 2010: 604–605).

In addition to these scholarly attempts to utilise the right to the city as a ground for reviving an urban human rights agenda, there have also been a number of attempts to institutionalise it as a positive, juridically enforceable right at both domestic and international levels. The most celebrated example is Brazil’s enactment of the Federal City Statute in 2001, which was the product of activism amongst both the urban poor and the recognition by federal legislators of the juridico-political importance of municipalities in urban planning and management (Fernandes 2007; 2010). Based on Articles 182 and 183 of Brazil’s 1988 Federal Constitution, the City Statute (Law No. 10.257) is a legislative scheme for the implementation of a comprehensive urban policy throughout Brazil through the following aims:

1) Regularising informal settlements (favelas) and integrating them into formal state and economic systems.
2) Prioritising the social functions of urban land over its commercial values and hence limiting incentives for speculation.
3) Providing mechanisms for the democratic involvement of urban inhabitants in urban planning and governance. (Fernandes 2007; Friendly 2013)

The last of these reforms builds on an already strong tradition of ‘participatory budgeting’ processes in a number of Brazilian cities, which allows for widespread public consultation and debate about annual public budgeting priorities for local authorities (Santos 1998; Wampler 2007). Edesio Fernandes acknowledges that the success of such legislative reforms will always depend upon the continued socio-political mobilisation of the most marginalised urban inhabitants, and he argues that, in this regard, Lefebvre’s work has provided a significant inspiration to urban reform movements in Latin America during past decades (Fernandes 2007: 208). While there have been a range of predictable obstacles to the full implementation of the aims of the City Statute (Friendly 2013), Fernandes characterises this piece of legislation as a major development, which has effectively ‘laid the foundations of the “right to the city”’ in Brazil (Fernandes 2007: 215). It is on this basis that he argues for the need to embrace an immanent critique of the limitations of the urban legal order, and for critical scholars to present a more sustained defence of the right to the city as an enforceable legal right (Fernandes 2007: 208). Such an argument feeds into the international campaign, largely driven by non-governmental organisations, for the recognition of a ‘World Charter on the Right to the City’ under the auspices of UNESCO and UN-HABITAT (Brown and Kristiansen 2009; UNESCO 2006; UN-HABITAT 2010). The most recent development in this project is the limited official recognition of institutionalised versions of the right to the city by the United Nations General Assembly resolution

There are certainly powerful reasons why campaigns for the development of legal safeguards for reforms in urban governance and the extension of democratic involvement in decision-making are worth defending. Apart from anything else, they may ensure that successful struggles for the recognition of urban rights do not have to be continually re-fought on the same terms. But it also needs to be recognised that there are dangers in mandating a positivist road to the implementation of the right to the city, which necessarily places so much reliance on the support of sympathetic state actors in order to achieve domestic or international legislative reforms in this area. In circumstances where activists are confronted with the implacable opposition of neoliberal and revanchist authoritarian administrations, the codification of the right to the city may be counter-productive to the overall aims of social movements which mobilise to challenge existing forms of spatial domination and exclusion. In addition, there is a deep contradiction between the incorporation of urban struggles within state-controlled institutions and the radical contestation with state power envisaged by Lefebvre’s version of autogestion. While not rejecting the strategic use of legal mechanisms to further political demands, he explicitly rejects the idea that the right to the city can be reduced to either a ‘natural’ human right or a positivist legal right (Lefebvre 1996: 194).

A recognition of Lefebvre’s reluctance to limit the right to the city to such orthodox categories is one of the reasons why Mark Purcell emphasises the connection between Lefebvre’s formulation of the right to the city and forms of political utopianism. Far from undermining its plausibility or efficacy as a strategic tool for urban politics, Purcell argues that its utopian orientation is precisely its strength, in that it provides a means through which inhabitants may appropriate their urban environments and challenge the limitations of political reality:

Lefebvre sees ‘the urban’ not merely as urbanization, but as a society beyond capitalism, one characterized by meaningful engagement among inhabitants embedded in a web of social connections. The urban is thus what we might call a possible world, a society yet to come. (Purcell 2014: 151)

Concrete utopia: between appropriation and abstraction

This emphasis on the need to extend the parameters of what is considered possible – in effect to ‘demand the impossible’ – is central to the way in which Lefebvre understands the right to the city as providing an opening for the emergence of differential space (Pinder 2015: 34). It also reflects what Nathaniel Coleman has recently referred to as a ‘utopian prospect’ that runs through many of Lefebvre’s writings, from his multi-volume Critique of Everyday Life, through his contributions on the production of space and his critique of state power in the late 1970s (Coleman 2013: 361). But it is also important to recognise that Lefebvre is particularly interested in a specific form of utopianism – a striving towards ‘concrete utopia’, which he distinguishes from ‘abstract’ types of utopianism (Lefebvre 1965; 1969). Interestingly, this is a categorisation which is also made by the philosopher Ernst Bloch in his magisterial The Principle of Hope (Bloch 1995). Because abstract utopia remains mired within the ‘possibilities’ of what is considered achievable and is unable to politically confront the impasses presented by the status quo, it must rely on flights of fantasy or technological dreams to engender faith in the idea of progress.

This can be contrasted with the way in which concrete utopia is grounded in the material possibilities of everyday life and is directed towards the transformation of social relations and
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perhaps ‘even the rule of impossibility’ (Lefebvre 2002: 347). As Lefebvre states in the recently rediscovered manuscript Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment:

An opposition is continuously at work between abstract and concrete utopias… Today… abstract utopia relies on technocrats; they are the ones who want to build the perfect city. They concern themselves with the “real”: needs, services, transport, the various subsystems of urban reality, and the urban itself as a system. They want to arrange the pieces of the puzzle to create an ideal. Contrast this with concrete utopia, which is negative. It takes as a strategic hypothesis the negation of the everyday, of work, of the exchange economy.

(Lefebvre 2014: 148)

This distinction between concrete and abstract utopias is important to our understanding of the ways in which the right to the city might be harnessed towards the production of differential space. To some extent, simply emphasising the utopian character of the right to the city in isolation does little more than restate the theoretical dichotomy between appropriation and abstraction, and thereby reinforces the categorical divide between differential and abstract space. This neatly fits in with a widespread tendency in much of the secondary literature on Lefebvre to associate his work with a polemical attitude towards all forms of abstraction, quantification and representation – treating them as inherently repressive – while regarding qualitative phenomena and manifestations of difference and appropriation as potentially emancipatory. Such interpretations are supported by numerous passages in The Production of Space, but when treated apart from Lefebvre’s broader work, this perspective tends to simplify his approach to abstraction and risks lapsing into a nihilistic rejection of rationality in general (Butler 2016; Dimendberg 1998: 37).

Indeed, as David Cunningham so perceptively points out, an attachment to pure notions of appropriation or social difference, ‘which somehow lie beyond abstraction per se’, prevents us from understanding the ways in which differential space could ever emerge in a concrete form (Cunningham 2005: 23). Cunningham identifies the limitations of resorting to a critique of the violence of abstraction in general, and instead argues for the importance of locating ‘the historically specific forms of violence as domination that it generates under certain conditions’ (Cunningham 2008: 467). Such a perspective allows us to acknowledge the necessity of some forms of abstraction in even imagining the pursuit of potentially emancipatory political strategies or the generation of alternative modes of social organisation. In making this argument, Cunningham highlights the inadequacy of those interpretations of Lefebvre which seek to invoke his critique of abstract space in the service of an absolutist rejection of abstraction as a philosophical category. A more helpful reading of this critique would recognise how it is equally concerned with the necessity of techniques of abstraction for comprehending ‘the processual materiality of lived space’, as it is directed towards the negativity of specific forms of abstraction (McCormack 2012: 719). This reflects Lefebvre’s sentiments in a lecture from the early 1960s, that one of the defining markers of modernity is the inescapable need to navigate a path through the continual production of abstractions:

Modernity is doomed to explore and to live through abstraction. Abstraction is a bitter chalice, but modernity must drain it to the dregs and, reeling in simulated inebriation, proclaim it the ambrosia of the gods. Abstraction perceived as something concrete, antinature and a growing nostalgia for nature which has somehow been mislaid – such is the conflict lived out by ‘modern’ man [sic].

(Lefebvre 1995: 193)
This acknowledgement of the ubiquity of abstraction in both its intellectual and practical manifestations allows us to go beyond the polemical aspects of Lefebvre’s account of abstract space in recognising the role of abstractions in the reproduction of social relations. In this context, Lefebvre’s introduction of the right to the city is instructive, as it operates as both a strategic and utopian demand, which reconceptualises the connections between appropriation and abstraction. It does so as a political and aesthetic appropriation of space, which rejects both the violent abstraction of positivist formulations of juridical rights and the moralistic repudiation of all forms of political organisation and institutional order. In this sense it presents a potential example of how it might be possible to struggle within and through abstraction by means of what Peter Osborne tentatively identifies as a form of ‘appropriation within abstraction’ (Osborne 2004: 27).

Conclusions

While abstract space is the dominant mode of spatial production within contemporary capitalism, it carries within it the seeds of an alternative form of space, which is based on appropriation and the defence of use values. It has been suggested in this chapter that the right to the city can be understood as a crucial political and social form through which struggles for the production of differential space may be waged. While the right to the city has been widely recognised within a range of disciplines and urban policy contexts, its formulation in much recent scholarship has been constrained within a juridical model of rights. But even acknowledging that the production of differential space cannot be pursued solely through the legislative and juridical codification of the right to the city, this does not eliminate complex questions regarding how the active and creative transformation of urban life may take place, and what forms of social ordering this might entail. It is in this context that it has been argued here that the most effective way of conceptualising the right to the city is by linking it to Lefebvre’s specific understanding of concrete utopianism, which arises from the material possibilities of the everyday, but points towards the transformation of social relations. In this way the right to the city provides a means of mediating between the violence of legal and economic abstractions and an idealist faith in the power of pure appropriation. It is only through understanding the right to the city as a demand for the political and aesthetic appropriation of space, which rejects both the limitations and potential violence of juridification, and the moral rejection of abstraction as such, that it might be possible to deploy this concept as a ground for resistance to dominant forms of spatial production.

References

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