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**Conclusions**

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**Introduction**

The right to the city implies nothing less than a revolutionary concept of citizenship.

*(Lefebvre 2014: 205)*

‘The city may be dead’, Lefebvre seems to say, but ‘long live the city!’ So is pursuit of the right to the city the pursuit of a chimera? In purely physical terms this is certainly so. But political struggles are animated by visions as much as by practicalities.

*(Harvey 2012: xvi)*

In this chapter, one of Lefebvre’s best-known concepts, the right to the city, is considered to determine whether it always presumes the right to the centre (Lefebvre 1991; 1996). Although Lefebvre may have construed the right to the city as extending primarily to the centre, during the 1960s and 70s, city centres have diminished in significance as they became the domain of smaller segments of urban populations. Consider London, New York and Rome, for example. Nevertheless, identifying the right to the city with a right to the centre spatialises the concept in a concrete manner by identifying it with a particular sort of place generally recognisable.

‘Centre’ refers primarily to the city centre, to the core (or heart) of any city; that part of it traditionally most intensely lived; alluding also to older quarters of cities. The benefit of identifying the right to the city with any given city’s historic, symbolic, and cultural core is that it rescues the concept from slipping into abstraction as a generalised ‘natural’, ‘universal’, or ‘inalienable right’, which, under conditions of alienation quickly lose their force, easily becoming guilt offerings to disenfranchised populations, or banal marketing slogans attached to already commodified cities.

As David Harvey has observed, ‘The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city’ (Harvey 2008: 23). Crucially, the right to the city is a right of transformation, of self and city. But how might we actually practice such a right? Does Lefebvre offer any clues? Joseph Rykwert asserts that practising rights to the city is performative: only through ‘constant community participation and involvement’ can we lay claim to the city (Rykwert 2000: 246). Rykwert’s proposition, that
The right to the centre?

we can transform reality (incrementally) through activist engagement with it, clearly echoes Lefebvre. However, Andy Merrifield asks: ‘what would the right to the city actually look like?’ (Merrifield 2011: 471). Is it ‘the right to centrality… a right to participate in life at the core’ (Merrifield 2011: 471). Or, he wonders, is it ultimately just that ‘the right to the city quite simply isn’t the right right that needs articulating’ (Merrifield 2011: 478)?

While Merrifield’s doubt is reasonable, especially considering the questionable continuing relevance of the city as a meaningful figure in the elaboration of ‘a new revolutionary conception of citizenship’ (which Lefebvre believed would be cause and effect of the right to the city), Merrifield’s reading is perhaps too literal (Lefebvre in Merrifield 2011: 470). The key is participation in decision-making, conceptualised as a new kind of citizenship entailing co-production of city and self, alongside power. Nevertheless, Merrifield identifies some significant tensions in Lefebvre’s assertion of the right to the city:

If urbanization is planetary, if the urban – or urban society – is everywhere, is this right to the city the right to the metropolitan region, right to the whole urban agglomeration? Or does it just mean the right to a certain neighborhood, to the city’s downtown, the right to centrality?

(Merrifield 2011: 470)

Here, Merrifield outlines problems of scale – from neighbourhood to world – but if the right to the city is primarily a right to the centre, then gentrification has all but exhausted the concept. Missing from Merrifield’s attempt to define exactly what city and the right to it might be at the scale of planetary urbanism is the market’s seemingly inexhaustible capacity for producing space in its own image, which neutralises the concept of the city as centre and citizens as participants in its co-production, while anaesthetising claims to rights over either. However, Lefebvre’s conviction that any apparently closed system, including global capitalism, is ‘a totality that is in fact decidedly open – so open, indeed, that it must rely on violence to endure’, suggests openings onto other possibilities (Lefebvre 1991: 11).

Moving away from the centre – as too consumed, and out of reach, to matter – makes it possible to simultaneously retain the right to the city concept while extending. Abandoning the centre constitutes a form of utopian resistance to gentrification, neoliberal spatial practices, and the spectacular city they produce. Shifting emphasis to the periphery arguably enhances the concept of the right to the city, without doing violence to it, and without neglecting Lefebvre’s conviction that the seeds of radical transformation reside in everyday life, coalescing in urban settings.

Consideration of the empowering potential of retreat from the centre is supported by reflection on In Vespa (On My Vespa), the first chapter of Italian director Nanni Moretti’s film Caro Diario (Dear Diary) (1993), in which the absence of central, touristic, and monumental Rome is crucial. On My Vespa (discussed in detail later), I argue, can be read as challenging judgements of a retreat from the centre as inevitably pessimistic or acquiescent, rather than as constituting a radically utopian gesture.

Legal rights to the city?

Documents like The World Charter on the Right to the City (Unnamed 2004) following the Social Forum of the Americas and the World Urban Forum, operate negatively on Lefebvre’s right to the city concept: no matter how ambitious or well-meaning the precepts of the charter may be, they colonise the right to the city, and, in so doing, neutralise it. Although Lefebvre engaged
with the present as the concrete setting of real transformation, he believed that a different social and economic order could only emerge out of alternative modes of production. Accordingly, the conditions under which the right to the city would be operative constituted a utopia for Lefebvre; neither state capitalism nor state socialism are qualified to produce the necessary conditions for fulfilling the right to the city as a moral imperative, rather than as a putatively legal one.

According to Lefebvre, ‘Today, the right to the city, fully understood appears as utopia (not to say pejoratively, utopist)’ (Lefebvre 1996: 196). Notwithstanding its utopian status, Lefebvre argues that achieving the right to the city ought to be a central aim of all plans, projects and programmes, no matter how restrictive the cost might appear (Lefebvre 1996: 196). This is key: the right to the city only seems impossible under the current order but is quickly revealed as possible when horizons shift beyond the limits of what is conceivable. Putting ‘the right to the city and some other rights of man and of the citizen [into practice]’ would require ‘a great increase of social wealth’ in tandem with ‘profound alterations in social relations themselves (the mode of production)’ (Lefebvre 1996: 196). In a utopian statement of the preconditions for making the right to the city operative, Lefebvre continues:

Such a development supposes an orientation of economic growth which would no longer carry within it its ‘finality’, and no longer aim at (exponential) accumulation for itself, but would instead serve superior ‘ends’.

(Lefebvre 1996: 196)

Lefebvre did not require that everything must change before anything could. For example, shifts in perspective, toward serving superior ends, are enough to initiate a process of fundamental transformation. However, increasing social wealth depends on alterations to modes of production and a recalibration of values, which can only take shape outside of the logic of rapacious capitalist accumulation. Despite the homoeostasis of capital accumulation making real change seem little more than a faraway fantasy, Lefebvre asserts that realising the utopian conditions under which the right to the city could be practised is a practical necessity:

While waiting for something better, one can suppose that the social costs of negation of the right to the city (and of a few others), accepting that we could price them, would be much higher than those of their realization. To estimate the proclamation of the right to the city as more ‘realistic’ than its abandonment is not a paradox.

(Lefebvre 1996: 196–97)

The wait for something better hints at the virtues of seeking salvation away from the corrosive aspects of the centre that conspire against citizenship and social life. On the periphery, one might even have more mental space for thinking about how to subvert apparently intransient conditions, in part because cracks in the system are often more visible where its reach is less decisive. At the very least, systemic contradictions will be in sharper relief away from the centre, if for no other reason than that individual and collective rhythms there are somewhat less dominated by overly rationalised clockwork time.

The conceptual attractiveness of the right to city risks it becoming just another empty slogan. Its appropriation by governments, or even non-governmental organisations (NGOs), carries with it permanent threats to neutralise the revolutionary-utopian import of Lefebvre’s phrase.
Systematisation of the right to the city may bring some benefits but alienates it from the spirit of Lefebvre’s thought. In this regard, legal scholar Chris Butler (see Butler’s chapter in Part 6) observes that:

there are dangers in mandating the positivist road to the implementation of the right to the city… legislative reforms… require the support of sympathetic governments; in the absence of such support, the codification of the right to the city is likely to be counterproductive to the overall aims of social movements mobilising to challenge existing forms of spatial domination and exclusion.

(Butler 2012: 148)

Butler continues by observing that for Lefebvre:

autogestion [self-organization] is an active political process that is not satisfied by either abstract models of transparency and public interest, or a retreat to pure dialogue between profoundly unequal parties.

(Butler 2012: 146)

As such, discourses on rights of the sort governments (including opposition parties) and even NGOs engage in is not what Lefebvre had in mind in asserting the right to the city:

If… the words and concepts ‘city’, ‘urban’, ‘space’, correspond to a global reality… the right to the city refers to the globality thus aimed at. Certainly, it is not a natural right, nor a contractual one. In the most ‘positive’ of terms it signifies the right of citizens and city dwellers, and of groups they… constitute, to appear on all the networks and circuits of communication, information and exchange.

(Lefebvre 1996: 194–95)

Involvement is key: citizens must be able to contribute to co-producing the urban, on at least as equal a footing as all other participants in the networks that shape social life and its settings. As a global reality, the right to the city encompasses spatial forms and social processes of the urban at all scales, from village to world, and from centre to periphery.

Lefebvre’s attention to scale and reach is significant. With the collapse of cities as centres of everyday life, production, and social relations, partly because of expansion beyond comprehensibility but also obscured by encroaching – homogenising – planetary urbanism and the flows of global capital, the social and productive significance of historic city centres diminishes:

There was a time when city centers were active and productive, and thus belonged to the workers (populaire). In this epoch, moreover, the City (cité) operated primarily through its center. The dislocation of this urban form began in the late 19th century, resulting in the deportation of all that the population considered active and productive into suburbs (banlieues), which were being located ever further away.

(Lefebvre 2014: 203)

Although expansion beyond historic centres may have been inevitable – lest cities be choked off by polluting industries, according to Lefebvre – moving outward served other interests as well: cheaper land outside of cities made industrial expansion easier, along with facilitating
transport (Lefebvre 2014: 203). Equally, labour is easier for the dominant class to control outside of city centres (where social interaction within and across classes was less restricted, facilitating both the organisation of labour and greater visibility of activism). Population displacement may initially empty city centres but ultimately creates opportunities for gentrification and transformation of the city into a space of exchange and consumption and a centre of decision-making and services (Tabb and Sawers 1978). Such zoning of diversified urban life outwards from the centre has little to do with the usability of the city, which is why Lefebvre asserts that the right to the city:

depends neither upon an urbanistic ideology, nor upon an architectural intervention, but upon an essential quality or property of urban space: centrality… there is no urban reality without a centre.

(Lefebvre 1996: 195)

Even when a vaguely geometric (or historic) centre remains identifiable, cities remade in the image of neoliberal global capitalist spatial practices lack traditional centrality. Moreover, throughout the global periphery (from cities in the hinterlands to inner and outer suburbs), there is very limited space for ‘encounter, actual or possible’ (Lefebvre 1996: 195). Even where spaces for gathering together exist, many have been colonised by commercial activities or are under constant threat of this.

Lefebvre’s preoccupation with the city, and centrality, derives from his identification of traditional cities with pre-modern, pre-capitalist, spatial organisation, which makes them models for a possible future urbanism. Hence his special affection for Florence, as a thriving historic city, with new factories on its edges. Obviously, coherent urban arrangements are more immediately comprehensible to the body and mind, than ever-expanding cities with multiple centres. As such, traditional urbanism – especially Mediterranean – provided Lefebvre with a powerful foundation for his critique of capitalist spatial practices.

In Lefebvre’s terms, city branding and ‘regeneration’ reveal today’s apparently successful cities as products (akin to mass-produced consumer goods) rather than as works (akin to works of fine art): largely uniform in character, and reproducible, rather than unique. For Lefebvre, the return of affluence and population brought to the centre by gentrification are symptomatic of the unmaking of cities into spectacular places of programmed consumption; the antithesis of dynamic urban settings of the unexpected.

The tension between Lefebvre’s observation of the necessity of centrality for practising the right to the city and the loss of city centres as gathering places outside the domain of spectacle and exchange suggests that ‘there is no [longer any] urban reality [because cities now largely exist] without a centre’. He continues, ‘It is true, of course, that the city endures, but only as museum and as spectacle’, as does urban life (away from the centre), in some form (Lefebvre 2014: 204). According to Lefebvre, cities may be finished, and with them any persisting diversified and productive vitality.

Urban regeneration and the expansion of cities, including the establishment of multiple centres, may seem to put the lie to the assertion that cities are finished, but close readings of Lefebvre reveal that the apparent success of urban expansion, and supposed rebirth of city centres, would not have impressed him. While this might confirm Lefebvre’s diminishing relevance, arguably, his thinking still challenges urbanists (architects, planners, urban designers, and geographers, amongst others) to make deeper analyses of the intensifying inequalities of cities, mirrored by their homogenisation and transformation into branded products, which may serve the many but largely benefit only the few.
The right to the centre?

In Lefebvre’s view:

the political benefit for the dominant classes is clear: the gentrification (embourgeoisement) of city centers, the replacement of the earlier productive centrality with a center for decision making and services.

(Lefebvre 2014: 203)

Homeostatic aspirations of capital for an eternal hold on power (economic and political) take shape in tandem with the seemingly contradictory absorption of surplus through urban transformation, which entailed repeated bouts of urban restructuring through ‘creative destruction’ (Harvey 2012: 16). The violence capitalist urbanisation requires to construct ‘the new urban world on the wreckage of the old, not only absorbs capital surpluses, but transforms the existing city physically and socially, through displacement, usually of the poor, the underprivileged, and those marginalised from political power (Harvey 2012: 87, 16, 22).

For Lefebvre, ‘[t]he urban center is not only transformed into a site of consumption; it also becomes an object of consumption, and is valued as such’ (Lefebvre 2014: 203). Paradoxically, ‘the producers, who had earlier been exported – or more accurately deported – to the suburbs, now return as tourists to the center from which they had been dispossessed and expropriated’ (Lefebvre 2014: 203–4). Touristic return to the centre does not, however, amount to recuperating rights to the city or the lost centre. Rather, in revisiting the centre, ‘Peripheral populations are today reclaiming urban centers as places of leisure, of empty and unscheduled time’ (Lefebvre 2014: 204). Arguably, these new spatial arrangements are manifestations of the ‘society of the spectacle’ (Debord 1977). As Lefebvre observes: ‘In this way the urban phenomenon is profoundly transformed. The historic center has disappeared as such. All that remains are, on the one hand, centers for power and decision making and, on the other, fake and artificial spaces’ (Lefebvre 2014: 204).

Ruined (or consumed) centres and bereft (or alienated) peripheries make the emergence of a new form of citizenship and a new urbanism that could render the right to the city operative matters of urgency. Until a new city arises, as a product of citizen self-determination, within which more just and equitable claims can be made and satisfied, the periphery will have to suffice as an outpost of possibility, on the edges of world cities, and in the hinterlands of nations. Opting out of the centre may entail sacrifices but is a most radical gesture that makes it possible to outmanoeuvre the apparent trappings of cosmopolitanism, including participation in the insatiable forces of gentrification. But even at the edges – particularly in provincial cities – capital lays claim to the remnants of civic space and community, in the form of city branding and culture-led regeneration. Although more visible in the periphery, the pace of destruction is slower there. Halting the capture of every space within the ‘world interior of capital’ depends on the remnants of community joining together in rejecting ‘sameness’ in favour of ‘difference’; a form of resistance so far made possible by the logic of unequal development, even if it seems as though there can be ‘no salvation away from the centre’ (Lefebvre 1996: 205–8; Sloterdijk 2013). Yet, so long as centralised political economies dominate, few other options remain.

Because we can adapt to even the most unpropitious of social and environmental conditions, demands for transformation arise only when prevailing conditions are perceived as so bad that change is necessary as a matter of survival. Shifts in consciousness provoked in this way enable social dreams of difference. Utopias catalyse this process through the ‘education of desire’, which cultivates the ‘desire for a better way of being’ (Levitas 2011: 140–2; 2013: 113–6). Confronted with an obstructing consciousness in paradoxical relation to the utopian vocation of educating
Nathaniel Coleman
desire for a better way of being, description alone is insufficient. Rather, models are required to show how a radical utopian subject might take flesh, to act upon self and city to transform both through action. Moretti’s *On My Vespa*, introduced earlier and discussed shortly, is a cinematic mediation on this; outlining different ways of experiencing the city, suggestive of alternative modes of appropriating the urban, while engaging in the sorts of encounters that occur there.

**The problem of the visual**

Clearly, using a film to support the reading of the right to the city developed here is fraught with problems, even if it proposes how cities could be used differently (see Jones in Part 3 of the book for a different Lefebvrian approach). Foremost is film’s complicity in spectacularising life and cities. Because constituted exclusively out of messages to the eye, whatever carnality film depicts will be a simulacrum of actual fleshy existence, or experience. Indeed, for Lefebvre, ocular dominance makes the ‘arts of image’ handmaidens of alienation:

> by assimilation, or perhaps by simulation, all of social life becomes the mere decipherment of messages by the eyes, the mere reading of texts. Any non-optical impression – a tactile one, for example, or a muscular (rhythmic) one – is no longer anything more than a symbolic form of, or a transitional step towards, the visual. An object felt, tested by the hands, serves merely as an ‘analogon’ for the object perceived by sight. (Lefebvre 1991: 286)

Lefebvre’s insights into capitalist spatial practices as based on exchange (including of images), on spectacularity, and on the consumerist entertainment miracle of city resurgence as primarily simulacra, are particularly revealing:

> That which is merely seen is reduced to an image – and to an icy coldness… Inasmuch as the act of seeing and what is seen are confused, both become impotent. By the time this process is complete, space has no social existence independently of an intense, aggressive and repressive visualization. It is thus – not symbolically but in fact – a purely visual space. The rise of the visual realm entails a series of substitutions and displacements by means of which it overwhelms the whole body and usurps its role. (Lefebvre 1991: 286)

In short, the dominance of the eye reproduces the logic of capitalist spatial practices, coldly reducing the lived realm to purely visual spaces that usurp the body, serving up everything as readily exchangeable products. Consequently, Lefebvre was not convinced that film (amongst other visual communication) could ‘expose errors concerning space’ because ‘the image is more likely to secrete it [errors and illusions of space] and reinforce it than to reveal it[;] images fragment; they are themselves fragments of space’ (Lefebvre 1991: 286).

Despite his reservations, surely Lefebvre could tolerate the use of a film developed here. Moreover, he was involved in the making of at least one film; ‘*La Droit à la Ville*’, a 26-minute documentary, completed in 1975, for which he provided the text – ‘*The Other Parises*’ – that formed its basis (Lefebvre 2003 [1974/1975]: 151–9). In his unique manner, the text oscillates between apparent romantic nostalgia and the most radical of utopian prospects for a socially resurgent city (Coleman 2015). He searches for the city beyond the ‘easily available’‘trite Paris’, where it might be possible ‘[t]o wander through a modern city pursuing the ‘reveries of a solitary stroller (Lefebvre 2003: 151, 152). Thus, while the critique of regeneration developed in
this chapter depends on Lefebvre, so does the use of *On My Vespa* as a model in the following section.

**Caro Diario and different centres**

In the modern, spectacular city of consumption, wandering constitutes a radical act of resistance, free of purpose in any quantifiable sense. It is in this spirit that Moretti’s first chapter of *Dear Diary*, (*On My Vespa*), is considered. *On My Vespa* is the antithesis of most films in which the city of Rome is protagonist, including Federico Fellini’s *Roma* (1972), Peter Greenaway’s *The Belly of an Architect* (1987), and Paolo Sorentino’s later *La Grande Bellezza* (2013). If *Roma* is overheated and chaotic, *The Belly of an Architect* is at times overwhelming in its pretentiousness, and in *La Grande Bellezza*, Rome is a decoration for nocturnal debaucheries, *On My Vespa* is so ordinary as to be radical by comparison.

In gentle and subtle ways, Moretti models an alternative way of being; for the self in the city, with others. His mostly solitary Vespa journey through Rome reveals less about any possible misanthropy than it does about how social change begins with the individual person. As Harvey observes:

> Through changing our world we change ourselves. How, then, can any of us talk about social change without at the same time being prepared, both mentally and physically, to change ourselves? Conversely, how can we change ourselves without changing our world?  
> *(Harvey 2000: 234–35)*

The unique rhythms of *On My Vespa* recall the spirit of Lefebvre’s posthumously published final book, *Rhythmanalysis* (Lefebvre 2004 [1992]). The rhythms observable in the everyday were of great interest to Lefebvre, not least because they constitute a reservoir of resistance to institutionalised time. According to Lefebvre, the rhythm-analytical method and its interdisciplinary practitioners are intertwined, both beginning with the body, its senses and its rhythms. The rhythm-analyst’s own body is his or her primary tool (Coleman 2015: 91–123; Lefebvre 2004). Arguably, Moretti enacts Lefebvrian practices of rhythm-analytical method leading to reimaginings of the city, including the periphery.

In no small way, in *On My Vespa* Moretti asks a question similar to one posed earlier (in a Lefebvrian register) by another Italian filmmaker, Pier Paolo Pasolini:

> What is Rome? Which is Rome? Where does Rome start and where does it end…? For the foreigner and visitor, Rome is the city contained within the old Renaissance walls; the rest is vague and anonymous periphery that is not worth seeing.  
> *(Pasolini 1995: 119)*

Moretti’s project is to expand the conventional boundaries of Rome (as conceived by tourists, expats, and privileged Italians), even beyond the extensions of the neo realists. In contrast to them, for Moretti, Rome is one city, or ought to be (not socially fragmented, or impossibly divided by class). That said, Moretti invites us into alternate Romes, in which its native spirit persists in the periphery, far outliving its displacement from the already consumed Centro. While Fellini hints at this in *Roma*, his film is animated by unsustainable optimism about the centre’s capacity to incorporate all manner of diversity and contradictions. For Moretti, the Centro Storico (Rome’s historic centre) is relatively unimportant. In *On My Vespa*, intramural locations figure in just a few shots. Ruins are relatively unimportant for Moretti, since the
promise of a more civil society lies in the future, even if its roots are in the past and it arises out of the present.

For the self-identified alternatives of Moretti’s generation, different Romes needed to be discovered or invented, away from the stomping grounds of the characters in ROMA, The Belly of an Architect, or La Grande Bellezza. Those Romes may still be beautiful, but the average Roman citizen’s right to them – to reside in the centre as an active participant – has long been conceded. If Fellini’s motorcycle barbarians that roar through Rome at the end of Roma supercharges the touristic scooter ride; in William Wyler’s aptly titled Roman Holiday (1953); Moretti’s Vespa journey acknowledges what is lost, that Fellini imagined could endure.

Whereas Greenaway’s The Belly of an Architect oscillates between detachment and misanthropy and the more intimate portrait of the city, Fellini’s Roma profits from an artistic pose of intense curiosity, proclaiming the right to observe; to represent but not intervene. Moretti portrays himself as a more fully engaged citizen and political being, who co-produces the city by living it beyond conventional boundaries. Although Moretti is surely an observer of the city, appreciative of its spirit and historical inheritance, he is not primarily an aesthete (Greenaway) or film industry insider (Fellini). His art is surely entertaining, but his self-deprecating presentation discloses a desire to share his curiosity for, and enjoyment of, life in his city, as a coalescence of lived rhythms. Ultimately, Moretti is decidedly active rather than passive in his critical project. He is far more operative than objective in his criticism of early 1990s complacency and blind ambition, and feels no need to apologise for this, or to supress it, all of which is largely played out in a Rome away from the historic centre, and from the corrosive forces then taking shape in the city, nationally and globally.

Moretti’s vision of Rome is the most dialectical of the films introduced above. His radical geography, and conviction that for a right to the city to persist, it must be claimed and enacted, even invented against unpropitious backdrops, places him close to Lefebvre. They also share a clear sense that space and time are inseparable. Spaces surely unfold through time, but for Moretti, the interplay between determined spaces, already given, and the social processes unfolding within them, that they facilitate, might, by way of considered effort, encourage a more civil society to take shape, through transformations suited to the needs of individuals and communities. Spaces of difference can be new or existing, ‘perceived’, ‘conceived’, or ‘lived’ differently (Lefebvre 1991). Moretti is too self-effacing to shout this in his films; his overarching interest in houses and neighbourhoods – in Rome and elsewhere – pronounces it, as does his self-acknowledged envy of those who can do things he cannot, all the while content to watch them excel at it. A charming example of which is his fanboy excitement over Jennifer Beals, star of the eighties film Flashdance (1983), who he encounters outside of Rome’s city walls.

The subject of Moretti’s art is the self, because real change begins with the individual person’s (re)shaping of space by moving through it and identifying cracks; other spaces, different centres, and alternative reference points in society and the city, suited to the emergence of different selves and alternative communities. Moretti considers himself an autarchico, in the sense of valuing self-sufficiency in the form of as much independence from the state as is possible. He is thus an individualist, but not in isolation, and is not a narcissist. Rather, for him, the state’s incompetence makes self-sufficiency the only viable option, but not primarily as an expression of anti-state sentiment. Situating socially engaged individuals as instruments of possible concrete utopias is another explicit point of convergence with Lefebvre.

The urban: place of encounter

Although Lefebvre’s conceptualisation of the right to the city is inevitably identified with the centre of Paris (more specifically the Marais), it is worth recollecting that his favourite city
was Florence, and that he extolled the virtues of Mediterranean cities generally, particularly in his final book, precisely because he identified their morphology with potentialities for ‘being free in the city outside the state’ (Lefebvre 1996: 208; Lefebvre and Régulier 2004: 96). For him, 

The right to the city cannot be conceived of as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities. it can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life. It does not matter whether the urban fabric encloses the countryside and what survives of peasant life, as long as the ‘urban’, place of encounter, priority of use value, inscription in space of a time promoted to the rank of a supreme resource amongst all resources, finds its morphological base and its practico-material realization. 

(Lefebvre 1996: 158)

While it might seem a small point, the dominant assumptions that Lefebvre’s assertion of the right to the city refers to the existing city (whichever one prefers), that it is a legal right, rather than a moral one (see Butler in this part of the book), and that it encompasses only city centres, ultimately obscures what is most radical in his urban thinking: only utopian visions of urban difference – at the scale of traditional cities and exploding urbanism – could redeem the human habitat by emphasising use over exchange, and the concrete over the abstract, in the production of heterogeneous, rather than homogeneous spaces of difference.

Conclusions

In this chapter, the problems of conflating Lefebvre’s key idea of the right to the city with a presumed right to the centre (or to ‘centrality’) have been outlined (Lefebvre 1991; 1996). The process of gentrification makes construing the right to the city with city centres irrelevant. Nevertheless, continuing to associate a right to the city with the centre spatialises the right to the city, at least initially, which secures it from becoming an abstract generalised inalienable right, even if only temporarily.

The unexpected assertion developed in this chapter is that before practising any rights to the city becomes possible, fantasies of the centre must be relinquished, because no matter how resurgent contemporary regenerated spectacular cities may seem, they are largely spaces of exclusion that hinder, rather than facilitate, the dynamics of everyday life. As consumed spaces, and as space of consumption, gentrified cities constitute a distortion of vital social life and project illusions of their centres as loci of participation in the co-production of the city (as setting and process). Even so, Lefebvre alerts us that the apparent totality of the loss of city centres and of our rights is equally illusory, masking just how fragile the dominant system is at any given moment. Because of its vocation for demonstrating how the apparently impossible can become possible, with just a gentle shift of horizons, utopia is superior to all other imaginaries for unmasking illusions of totality, including apparent permanent exclusion from the centre.

A key reason for moving conceptualisations of the right to the city beyond the centre is that expansion of cities far beyond their original boundaries has rendered traditional centres less meaningful, partly because of changing proximities to them in relation to peripheries but also because expanded conurbations with multiple centres stretch the capacity to cognitively map them. This raises a paradox: as cities expand and more residents come to live away from the core, centres lose significance; through transformation into development opportunities for different, more affluent classes, cities are remade into domains of spectacle and exchange (of services and consumer products), and into touristic destinations, including for those who have
been excluded. Ultimately, retreat from the Centre is proposed as empowering; utopian, rather than simply acquiescence to prevailing conditions.

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