

Which right to which city? In defence of political-strategic clarity

Marcelo Lopes de Souza

Abstract

Coined at the end of the 1960s by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, the expression “(the) right to the city” has become fashionable these days. The price of this has often been the trivialisation and corruption of Lefebvre’s concept: In many cases it seems to mean just the right to a more “human” life in the context of the capitalist city and on the basis of a (“reformed”) representative “democracy”. In contrast to this, David Harvey, an eminent Marxist urban researcher who has paid attention to Lefebvre’s ideas since the beginning of the 1970s, retains a non-reformist understanding of the “right to the city”. What is more, he reaches beyond the usual academic level of critical analysis in order to make political-strategic evaluations and recommendations. However, from a libertarian point of view, his words sound very much like an attempt to see (partially) new phenomena (such as many contemporary, autonomy-oriented and radical-democratically based social movements as well as the conditions under which they act) through old lenses: namely through the lenses of statism, centralism, and hierarchy. The result of this is often a misrepresentation of today’s social actors, their agency, potentialities, and strategies. The aim of this paper is to show the limits of such an interpretation, as well as to discuss what a “right to the city” (and the strategy to achieve this goal) could be from a libertarian point of view – not as a purely speculative enterprise, but under inspiration of the experiences of different, concrete social movements from Latin America to Europe to Africa.

The right to the city as the right to *another* city in *another* world: back to Henri Lefebvre – and beyond Lefebvre

We can observe an increasing debate (and to a certain degree a mobilisation too) around the slogan “right to the city” – which, at the first glance, directly or indirectly has the theses and analyses formulated by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s as a source of inspiration.

But why “*at the first glance*”?... Because in spite of a renaissance of interest in Lefebvre’s works in academic circles (and to some extent also elsewhere, from NGOs to international and national [urban] “development” agencies and the like), it does not seem that Lefebvre’s *approach* and *radicality* are always seriously taken into consideration and preserved. *On the contrary.*

From Brazil's *Ministério das Cidades* (= Ministry of Cities) to Hamburg's *Recht auf Stadt-Netzwerk* (= Right to the City Network), from small NGOs to *UN-Habitat*, we can find a legion of people who use "the right to the city" as a sort of umbrella-phrase. Many behave as if it should be clear to everybody what the "right to the city" means (more or less like "sustainability" and other umbrella-expressions and phrases). However, "the right to the city" should be regarded (at least by emancipatory social movements and radical intellectuals) as a kind of "*contested territory*", since the danger of a *vulgarisation* and *domestication* of Lefebvre's phrase by status-quo-conform institutions and forces is a real one.

Let us ask: What is understood as "the right to the city", and what are the premises or certain types of interpretation?

For many (surely most) NGOs and (urban) "development" agencies, the "right to the city" seems to imply the following ideal scenario: "*human and affordable housing*" (from "good" housing in a strict sense to "good" infrastructure at the neighbourhood level to "environmentally friendly" means of transport) + "*participation*" (and in this context it seems to be that for most of those observers and actors mere consultation is already something to be celebrated). The political-philosophical and social-theoretical (latent or manifest) premises could be resumed as follows: "As much social justice and environmental protection as possible, of course; but please let us be realistic, the time of utopia has passed".

Concretely, this means that: 1) neoliberalism obviously is refused, but not capitalism *as such* (i.e. there is a certain implicit presupposition that neoliberalism should, in the best of all cases, be replaced by a sort of "left-Keynesianism", which could in turn be supplemented by alternative, "solidarity"-oriented economic [micro]circuits); 2) protectionism (which intensely damages the so-called "poor countries" of the so-called "global South") must obviously be challenged and overcome, but the global (capitalist) market could be "tamed" (for instance, by means of a "Tobin-tax" and the like) and not necessarily eradicated and replaced in the course of an eradication of capitalism itself; 3) a much more efficient environmental protection in the cities and worldwide must be achieved, but this in the framework of an economic policy which "seriously" tries to "bring together" and "combine" the (capitalist) market with "ecological goals" (and this means concretely, that the warning and wisdom propagated by authors such as Murray Bookchin, Cornelius Castoriadis and others, according to whom capitalism as a mode of production is *intrinsically and essentially anti-ecological*, is either ignored or regarded as wrong and alarmist); 4) a "participative democracy" must be achieved, and this usually means the following: representative democracy must be *supplemented* and "*corrected*" by "participation" (that is, representative "democracy" and its premises – state apparatus, "free mandate" etc. – remain unquestioned).

These, in a nutshell, are the usual premises and the philosophical and theoretical background of contemporary NGOs and "development" agencies. For them, the future should not be the same as the present; but since they cannot (and in many cases do not want to) imagine a really different future, they

are content with “solutions” which, at the end of the day, represent and lead to a future which is more or less a mere extension of the present. Castoriadis once said (in the context of a critique of the capitalist ideology of economic development) that he refused to act in the name of “realism” as a kind of “consultant for development with minimum horror” (Castoriadis 1986). Well, it seems that many (or most, perhaps all) NGOs and “development” agencies feel comfortable in their role of “consultants for urban development with minimum horror”. But is this the “right to the city”?...

In the midst of such a mediocre and conformist atmosphere, it is not an accident and it should not be a surprise that the “right to the city” often only means, even for many grassroots activists (particularly in the so-called “Global North”), opposition to gentrification with the result that alternative urban politics is reduced to a “politics of turf” – even if (micro)local groups and organisations build networks and sometimes act and fight at a common front. “We demand that our neighbourhood remains as it is (instead of our historically and culturally valuable and tasteful buildings being replaced by horrible shopping malls and similar things for the sake of capital accumulation); we demand lower rents (instead of increasing rents for the sake of speculators); we demand that artists and all creative people are not banished from our inner cities”. OK. *But is this all enough?* In certain parts of the globe all this can be a legitimate *beginning* – while in most other parts we must face the challenge of the urgent satisfaction of much more basic needs from the very beginning. But the reduction of the “right to the city” to a “politics of turf” is clearly insufficient as a horizon for strategic goals and a general framework for thinking and action.

In other words, (micro)level demands and claims must be put into a broader context. For instance: 1) *gentrification and the “housing question” as “logical” results of contemporary capitalism* (and not simply or above all as a matter of [lack of] “political will”); 2) *“participation” usually as a tool for “crisis management” and systemic stabilisation* (the rare consistent cases of government-sponsored participation notwithstanding); 3) *“urban diversity” as a “location factor” for investors* (by the way, even “subversive” creativity can be commodified, provided it is properly “tamed” or even “domesticated”). If we do not consider questions like these, we see the “tree” but not the “forest”, to remember an old metaphor.

In fact, in many cases the “right to the city” seems to mean the following: *The right to a better, more “human” life in the context of the capitalist city, the capitalist society and on the basis of a (“reformed” and “improved”) representative “democracy”*. The fact that neoliberalism, gentrification and “disenchantment with politics” are more or less critically analysed does not necessarily imply that the fundamental premises of neoliberalism, gentrification and “disenchantment with politics” are consistently criticised (and refused). This requires some further and more decisive steps. Who is still interested in taking this radical path?...

Those who do not want to speak a “schizophrenic” or “doublespeak” language (more or less like 1984’s “Newspeak”) must be conscious that Henri Lefebvre’s

path was a radical one. Maybe we could say – his (often misunderstood) heterodoxy notwithstanding – that his Marxism prevented him from being even more radical, and sometimes more precise or simply more just. A few examples should suffice:

1) Although as a very heterodox and non-Leninist Marxist he cultivated *autogestion* as a very important political concept,¹ he apparently did not have any interest in paying adequate tribute to the very complex and radical discussion on workers self-management which had been developed since the 1950s by members of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group in France (especially by Cornelius Castoriadis), let alone to the ancient anarchistic roots of this political conception.²

2) Furthermore, it is also a little disappointing that although he demanded an *autogestion généralisée* (generalised self-management) and simultaneously criticised “l’expérience de la planification autoritaire et centralisée” (the experience of authoritarian and bureaucratic planning”) of bureaucratic “socialism” (Lefebvre 1998: 77), and in spite of his reservations regarding Yugoslavia’s experience,³ he nevertheless insisted on using the term *autogestion* to refer to the Yugoslavian case. (Was the Yugoslav reality under Marshall Josip Tito ultimately not similar to the bureaucratic “socialism” of the pro-Soviet countries, a little less centralisation and a little more “participation” notwithstanding?...).

Nevertheless, the “right to the city” for Lefebvre was not reducible to the right to better housing, lower rents etc. in the framework of the capitalist city (which was in fact in his eyes a “non-city”, the opposite of a true human and enjoyable city), but the right to a very different life in the context of a very different, just society (see Lefebvre, 1991; see also Lefebvre 1976, 1981 and especially 1983). Symptomatically, he did not talk about “participation” (or “participative democracy” in present-day reformist sense), but about *autogestion*. Despite some shortcomings, Lefebvre was and remain a crucial source of inspiration for radical thinking – and above all, he was never a mere “consultant for (urban) development with minimum horror”.

¹ See, for instance, the essay published by him in 1966, in which he deals with *autogestion*’s theoretical problems (Lefebvre 2009), and his book *L’irruption: de Nanterre au sommet* (Lefebvre 1998), written after the events of May 1968 and republished thirty years later.

² He reduced the libertarian contribution to this debate to Proudhon’s thought (whose ambiguities and ambivalences he accurately stressed: see Lefebvre 2009: 142-3), simply ignoring the contributions made by Bakunin, Kropotkin and others. As far as the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group is concerned, Lefebvre’s reflections on *autogestion* lie far behind the level of deepness of the analyses carried out by them in the 1950s and 1960s (see Castoriadis 1983b and 1983c), not to mention Castoriadis’ seminal discussions on the “*projet d’autonomie*” (= “autonomy project”) in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s (see Castoriadis 1975, 1983a, 1990b, 1996, 1999).

³ Sometimes manifested only in an implicit way (see for instance Lefebvre 2009: 147-8).

Certainly, nobody has to agree with Lefebvre. And in times like these – an age of generalised conformism and lack of imagination (Castoriadis 1990a) – it is understandable that many people feel and think (even if they do not say it) that Lefebvre’s approach sounds “too utopian”. *But then they should at least be honest enough to leave Lefebvre alone, instead of using his words and even his name to decorate a reformist discourse and to legitimate a reformist, status-quo-conforming approach to our problems.*

The slogan “the right to the city” has become fashionable worldwide. Is this a good thing? Certainly not, if we have to pay a price as high as the *trivialisation* and *corruption* of Lefebvre’s concept – with the result of this being that the expression possibly becomes useless for critical-radical purposes. Several expressions and concepts have already been more or less “colonised” in recent years and decades. It is high time to try and avoid a similar fate for the “right to the city”.

One step forward and two steps back: David Harvey and the long-lasting power of prejudice

Murray Bookchin, one of the most eminent libertarian thinkers of the second half of the 20th century, and himself author of important works about the city and citizenship (see for instance Bookchin 1974, 1992 and 1995), said, at the beginning of a text on Marx’s and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto*, that:

It is politically restorative to look with a fresh eye at *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (to use its original title), written before Marxism was overlaid by reformist, postmodernist, spiritual, and psychological commentaries. From an examination of this work on its own terms, what emerges is that it is not a “text” intended to be served up for academic deconstruction and convoluted exegesis but rather the manifesto of a party that challenged the existence of capitalist social relations and their underlying class base. The *Manifesto* directly faced the exploitative social order of its time and intended to move a class – the proletariat – to revolutionary action against it. (Bookchin 2010)

Bookchin, who used to be a Marxist in his youth, was still sympathetic enough to pay Marx a significant tribute, not only in this but also in other texts as well. He recognised that – Marx’s contradictions, problems and ambiguities notwithstanding – there is a big difference between Marx’s genius and the dogmatic mediocrity of many (or most) 20th century Marxists. In another text, he asked, after quoting some of Marx’s and Engels’ famous words from the *Manifesto* (“[i]n order to arrive at its content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead”):

Is the problem any different today, as we approach the twenty-first century? Once again the dead are walking in our midst – ironically, draped in the name of Marx, the man who tried to bury the dead of the nineteenth century. So the revolution of our own day can do nothing better than parody, in turn, the October Revolution of 1917 and the civil war of 1918-

1920, with its “class line,” its Bolshevik Party, its “proletarian dictatorship,” its puritanical morality, and even its slogan, “soviet power.” The complete, all-sided revolution of our own day that can finally resolve the historic “social question,” born of scarcity, domination and hierarchy, follows the tradition of the partial, the incomplete, the one-sided revolutions of the past, which merely changed the form of the “social question,” replacing one system of domination and hierarchy by another. (...) At a time when all the political institutions of hierarchical society are entering a period of profound decay, we hear the hollow demands for a “political party” and a “worker’s state.” (...) At a time when centralization and the state have been brought to the most explosive point of historical negativity, we hear the hollow demands for a “centralized movement” and a “proletarian dictatorship.” (Bookchin 2004b: 109)

“Listen, Marxist!”, the text from which the afore quoted passage was extracted, was originally published in 1969. Forty years later, David Harvey, one of the most eminent Marxist thinkers of our time, writes a text intended to encourage activists in relation to the task of “Organizing for the Anti-Capitalist Transition” (Harvey 2009). In contrast to another recent text by him, basically analytic in its nature and devoted to a reflection on the “right to the city” (Harvey 2008), the essay published in 2009 is fundamentally intended to be a guide to action. What did the author recommend?

He begins with an analysis of the present-day more-than-financial crisis and its origins. Most of this analysis is undoubtedly lucid. There is no surprise in this, for he has been, for almost forty years, one of the world’s most brilliant and consistent critical geographers and urban researchers. Even later in the text, when he is examining the possibilities of creating alternatives to capitalist society, he shows a sometimes a refreshing and surprising flexibility, as the following quotation exemplifies:

An anti-capitalist political movement can start anywhere (in labor processes, around mental conceptions, in the relation to nature, in social relations, in the design of revolutionary technologies and organizational forms, out of daily life, or through attempts to reform institutional and administrative structures including the reconfiguration of state powers). The trick is to keep the political movement moving from one moment to another in mutually reinforcing ways.

And what is more:

The left has to look to build alliances between and across those working in the distinctive spheres. An anti-capitalist movement has to be far broader than groups mobilizing around social relations or over questions of daily life in themselves. Traditional hostilities between, for example, those with technical, scientific, and administrative expertise and those animating social movements on the ground have to be addressed and overcome.

Unfortunately, the above quoted remarks do not mean that Harvey departs from the typically Marxist reductionisms and prejudices which have been pointed out for many years, or even several decades, not only by European and US-American thinkers such as Murray Bookchin (2004a, 2004b), and above all

Cornelius Castoriadis (1975, 1983a, 1985), but also by activists (and intellectuals who work close to them) from Latin America to Africa. When Harvey enters the domain of practical organising and strategy, he often shows the old prejudices and old-fashioned centralistic beliefs which have always characterised the Marxist mainstream. Curiously, he is almost more critical towards radical social movements than towards NGOs. His judgement about the latter sometimes even sounds too tolerant and diplomatic, though it is generally very critical and accurate:

There are now vast numbers of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that play a political role that was scarcely visible before the mid-1970s. Funded by both state and private interests, populated often by idealist thinkers and organizers (they constitute a vast employment program), and for the most part dedicated to single-issue questions (environment, poverty, women's rights, anti-slavery and trafficking work, etc), they refrain from straight anti-capitalist politics even as they espouse progressive ideas and causes. In some instances, however, they are actively neoliberal, engaging in privatization of state welfare functions or fostering institutional reforms to facilitate market integration of marginalized populations (microcredit and microfinance schemes for low-income populations are a classic example of this).

While there are many radical and dedicated practitioners in this NGO world, their work is at best ameliorative. Collectively, they have a spotty record of progressive achievements, although in certain arenas, such as women's rights, health care, and environmental preservation, they can reasonably claim to have made major contributions to human betterment. But revolutionary change by NGO is impossible. They are too constrained by the political and policy stances of their donors. So even though, in supporting local empowerment, they help open up spaces where anti-capitalist alternatives become possible and even support experimentation with such alternatives, they do nothing to prevent the re-absorption of these alternatives into the dominant capitalist practice: they even encourage it.

In contrast to this lucidity, he shows himself as rather ignorant of the real complexity of contemporary social movements, to the point of partly misrepresenting them:

The second broad wing of opposition arises out of anarchist, autonomist, and grassroots organizations (GRO's) which refuse outside funding even as some of them do rely upon some alternative institutional base (such as the Catholic Church with its "base community" initiatives in Latin America or broader church sponsorship of political mobilization in the inner cities of the United States). This group is far from homogeneous (...). There is, however, a common antipathy to negotiation with state power and an emphasis upon civil society as the sphere where change can be accomplished. The self-organizing powers of people in the daily situations in which they live have to be the basis for any anti-capitalist alternative. Horizontal networking is their preferred organizing model. So-called "solidarity economies" based on bartering, collectives, and local production systems is their preferred political economic form. They typically oppose the idea that any central direction might be necessary and reject

hierarchical social relations or hierarchical political power structures along with conventional political parties. Organizations of this sort can be found everywhere and in some places have achieved a high degree of political prominence. Some of them are radically anti-capitalist in their stance and espouse revolutionary objectives and in some instances are prepared to advocate sabotage and other forms of disruption (shades of the Red Brigades in Italy, the Baader Meinhof in Germany, and the Weather Underground in the United States in the 1970s).

Let us take a break now to pose a simple question: What do centralised, *Marxist and Leninist* inspired organisations such as German Baader-Meinhof group (better: *Rote Armee Fraktion* [RAF]) from the past have in common with contemporary, autonomy-oriented and radical-democratically organised social movements such as the Mexican Zapatistas?!... To consider non-“pacifism” as a kind of common ground is a misrepresentation of facts, since the RAF’s terrorist disruption strategy is fundamentally different from the politically more productive and ethically more legitimate use of weapons – and most frequently just stones and Molotov cocktails – by Zapatistas, *piqueteros*, alter-globalisation movements (or even the German *Autonomen* in the 1980s and 1990s), and so on.

The next sentences in that paragraph are lapidary:

But the effectiveness of all these movements (leaving aside their more violent fringes) is limited by *their reluctance and inability to scale up their activism into large-scale organizational forms capable of confronting global problems. The presumption that local action is the only meaningful level of change* [emphasis added] and that anything that smacks of hierarchy is anti-revolutionary is self-defeating when it comes to larger questions.

Who shares the presumption that “local action is the only meaningful level of change”? “Think globally, act locally” is a slogan propagated in the wake of the increasing popularity of the “sustainable development”-ideology and a certain sort of environmental activism, but it does not have very much to do with Mexican Zapatistas or Argentinian *piqueteros*. Harvey apparently ignores how the Zapatistas’ use of Internet as early as in the middle of the 1990s enhanced their ability to achieve a “diffusion” of their solidarity network, not to mention the peculiar way of “global framing” (to use two of Sidney Tarrow’s (2005) expressions) which has always been one of their characteristics, their regional roots and “rootedness” in Chiapas notwithstanding. And a *politics of scale* can also be observed in relation to several other movements, such as the shack dweller’s movement *Abahlali baseMjondolo* in South Africa which has developed a number of settlements into communes but has also, for instance, organised in solidarity with *Fanmi Lavalas* in Haiti. Harvey is simply mistaking local and regional “rootedness” for a narrow “politics of turf” and parochialism,

and in so doing he grossly misrepresents many of today's most important social movements.⁴

It is true that many radical movements regard organising at the local level as a clear priority – and yes, they do it partly as a result of their approach to social (spatial) change, such as valuating and exploring the connections between all spheres of life (production, consumption, politics, culture) inside concrete “lived spaces” and *dissident territories* (Souza 2006a). But this priority is also simply a matter of necessity: Poor activists from “(semi)peripheral” countries cannot afford to travel around the world as campaigners and “rooted cosmopolitans” from Europe and the USA can; very often they do not even have easy access to the Internet; and they do not speak foreign languages.⁵ However, this priority does not necessarily mean that parochialism is cultivated as a value. Sure, *territorial corporatism* (Souza 2006a) has been a characteristic of many urban activisms for decades, under the influence of clientelism and *caciquismo*, or (as far as middle-class activists are concerned) as an expression of the defence of some privileges. However, this does not have anything to do with the really emancipatory movements such as the Zapatistas, South Africa's Abahlali baseMjondolo (shack dwellers' movement), the most radical parts of the Argentinian *piqueteros* and the Brazilian *sem-teto*, and so on – which are very often open to “transnational activism” (in the form of dialogue, networking and co-operation) as far as possible given the material constraints that they face.

After criticising social movements in a rather vague and generalising way, David Harvey then offers what can be seen as a logical conclusion – a discreet apology for Leninist parties and of centralism in general:

⁴ Of course the Zapatistas are not an urban social movement and so their relevance in terms of a “right to the city” is obviously only an indirect one. However, it is important to mention them here (along with some other movements such as Brazil's *sem-terra* [landless land workers] movement), for they also help to demonstrate Harvey's oversimplifications. Moreover, Lefebvre differentiated between the *city* in itself and the *urban* (“*l'urbaine*”), which represents a type of society, and in this sense it is possible to argue that the “urban problematic” concerns *all* social-political agents, even in countries such as Mexico or Brazil. It is not an accident that MST (Brazil's internationally known *sem-terra* organization) tried to stimulate activism in the cities by means of supporting and inspiring the creation of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto (MTST) (literally, Movement of Roofless Workers), which is the best known organisation of the *sem-teto* movement, urban counterpart to the *sem-terra*.

⁵ Sidney Tarrow wrote that “[i]n recent decades, rapid electronic communication, cheaper international travel, diffusion of the English language, and the spread of the “script” of modernity (...) have facilitated transnational activism.” (Tarrow 2005: 5) But facilitated for *whom?*... Tarrow defines “rooted cosmopolitans” as “*individuals and groups who mobilize domestic and international resources and opportunities to advance claims on behalf of external actors, against external opponents, or in favor of goals they hold in common with transnational allies.*” (Tarrow 2005: 29, emphasis in the original) But it is irritating obvious that young, educated European and US-American “rooted cosmopolitans” and activists can exercise transnationalism much more easily than activists from “(semi)peripheral” countries. Tarrow did not completely ignore the differences in resources between activists in “North” and “South”, but he did not emphasize them adequately.

The third broad trend is given by the transformation that has been occurring in traditional labor organizing and left political parties, varying from social democratic traditions to more radical Trotskyist and Communist forms of political party organization. This trend is not hostile to the conquest of state power or hierarchical forms of organization. Indeed, it regards the latter as necessary to the integration of political organization across a variety of political scales. In the years when social democracy was hegemonic in Europe and even influential in the United States, state control over the distribution of the surplus became a crucial tool to diminish inequalities. The failure to take social control over the production of surpluses and thereby really challenge the power of the capitalist class was the Achilles heel of this political system, but we should not forget the advances that it made even if it is now clearly insufficient to go back to such a political model with its social welfarism and Keynesian economics. The Bolivarian movement in Latin America and the ascent to state power of progressive social democratic governments is one of the most hopeful signs of a resuscitation of a new form of left statism.

At this point Harvey's view becomes clearer and clearer. Stressing that left political parties are "not hostile to the conquest of state power or hierarchical forms of organization" (of course not, that is their *raison d'être!*), he also assumes that these parties are experiencing some remarkable "transformation" (how he interprets it, it will become clear soon). The experience of social democracy and "eurocommunism" was apparently a very positive one in his eyes ("[i]n the years when social democracy was hegemonic in Europe and even influential in the United States, state control over the distribution of the surplus became a crucial tool to diminish inequalities"), albeit at the same time an incomplete and partly unsuccessful one ("[t]he failure to take social control over the production of surpluses and thereby really challenge the power of the capitalist class was the Achilles heel of this political system"). Anyway, the new forms of "left statism" are being built elsewhere – for instance in "Bolivarian" Venezuela, which is a remarkably ambivalent and contradictory experiment, to say the least –, and they seem to be a great hope for Harvey.

His reasoning reaches its "climax" when he gives us more examples which didactically illustrate his way to evaluate concrete situations:

While there are some signs of recovery of both labor organizing and left politics (as opposed to the "third way" celebrated by New Labor in Britain under Tony Blair and disastrously copied by many social democratic parties in Europe) along with signs of the emergence of more radical political parties in different parts of the world, the exclusive reliance upon a vanguard of workers is now in question as is the ability of those leftist parties that gain some access to political power to have a substantive impact upon the development of capitalism and to cope with the troubled dynamics of crisis-prone accumulation. (...) But left political parties and labor unions are significant still, and their takeover of aspects of state power, as with the Workers' Party in Brazil or the Bolivarian movement in Venezuela, has had a clear impact on left thinking, not only in Latin America. The complicated problem of how to interpret the role of the Communist Party in China, with

its exclusive control over political power, and what its future policies might be about is not easily resolved either.

Mistaking appearances for substance, he assumes that Brazil's government under Lula is a left-wing one (while it is in truth a populist government, based on a coalition of parties which ranges from centre-left to centre-right and which is led by a former left-wing party⁶). But what is particularly astonishing is that for him the problem of how to interpret the role of the Communist Party in China is a "complicated" one...

It is no wonder that he later stresses that the "(...) co-revolutionary theory earlier laid out would suggest that *there is no way that an anti-capitalist social order can be constructed without seizing state power* [emphasis by MLS]." It is really amusing to read all this, because he had written a couple of pages before that "[t]he failings of past endeavors to build a lasting socialism and communism have to be avoided and lessons from that immensely complicated history must be learned". It seems he has not learned very much.

When Harvey writes that "a global anti-capitalist movement is unlikely to emerge without some animating vision of what is to be done and why", this is a sentence which sounds like a foretaste and the meaning of which becomes clear later: He dreams (as orthodox Marxists do) of a "privileged revolutionary subject" and of a unifying theory (or "vision") which clarifies what this "subject" has to do ("and why"). He knows that the working class (*Proletariat* in a strict sense) with its trade-unions and political parties (social democracy and the like) is no longer a "privileged revolutionary subject" in history. As a Marxist, he must be a little confused (and there are so many phenomena which can confuse Marxists nowadays, such as the role of peasants as much more relevant critical protagonists than factory workers or the critical-transformative role of large portions of the *Lumpenproletariat*⁷); but as a coherent and more or less

⁶ Brazil's economic and social policy under Lula has been a mixture of statism and neoliberal elements, in which features such as "fiscal responsibility", the priority given to agribusiness and the absence of a true land reform are "tempered" by compensatory social policies. By the way, when Harvey (surely not very well informed, but actually reproducing a statist interpretative bias as well) writes in his earlier paper on the "right to the city" that a new legal framework, conquered "after pressure from social movements", was introduced as a tool "to recognize the collective right to the city" in Brazil (Harvey 2008, 39), he is both exaggerating the reach of this legal framework (and even the role of the social movements in the process) and contributing to a trivialisation of the "right to the city"-slogan.

⁷ As everybody knows, Marx and Engels (see *The Communist Manifesto*, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, *The Peasant War in Germany* etc.) were very suspicious towards both peasants and the so-called "*Lumpenproletariat*": Both were regarded as intrinsically conservative and potentially reactionary. Of course, the peasantry could and should be "guided" by the industrial workers (the only way to escape conservatism); but even in this case typical Marxism considered peasants as, in the best of all cases, secondary partners, never as true protagonists. As far as the "*Lumpenproletariat*" is concerned, the prejudice is even bigger, sometimes expressed even in moralistic terms ("the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society"; "this scum of depraved elements from all classes"; "this scum, offal, refuse of all classes"...). Interestingly, in Brazil (a country whose population predominantly lives in cities) the by far most important and combative organisations of social movements are animated by peasants (*sem-terra*), and in countries like Brazil,

orthodox Marxist he cannot prevent himself from dreaming of unifying “visions”, “transformed” left-parties, centralistic and statist solutions, “seizing state power”, and so on. Nothing new in the west... It is against this ideological background that we have to interpret his words from his earlier paper on the “right to the city”, when he regrets that social movements have not “yet converged on the singular aim of gaining greater control over the uses of the surplus – let alone over the conditions of its production”. (Harvey 2008: 39)

We can agree with Harvey when he says that “Lenin’s question [‘what is to be done?’] demands an answer” (Harvey 2009). But it is difficult to see how he (or Lenin) can help us to find a convincing answer. And not only libertarians would agree on this point, but also probably Henri Lefebvre himself.

“Another world [and another city] is possible”? Some radical remarks about the circumstances under which this slogan can really make sense

What could be the alternative solutions?... We can reflect theoretically on them, but we cannot design them as a “blueprint for the future”, as rationalists always (try to) do. Fortunately, alternative solutions (at least partial ones) have been implemented by different social movements for a long time, although some intellectuals apparently cannot see them.

When Harvey writes that “to ignore the state and the dynamics of the inter-state system is therefore a ridiculous idea for any anti-capitalist revolutionary movement to accept”, we can ask who is “ignoring” the state. The *piqueteros*, who won the right to manage government welfare subsidies themselves (the so-called *planes*)? The Zapatistas, who have fought against the Mexican state, but were and are also prepared to negotiate with it? The Brazilian *sem-terra* and *sem-teto*, who try to influence public policies by means of putting the state under pressure? Certainly not. South Africa’s *Abahlali baseMjondolo* proclaimed the slogan “No land! No house! No vote!”, and has actively boycotted elections in protest at the government’s and developed some of their own dual power institutions. However, boycotting elections is a tactical manoeuvre which does not prevent *Abahlali* from trying to talk to the state apparatus as far as it is possible in order to present demands; unfortunately, response of the ruling party to progress in negotiations with government officials has been brutal repression.

In fact, even Spanish anarchists already knew that a radical opposition to the state (by the way, much more radical than the Marxist critique of the *capitalist* state) is not the same as “ignoring” the state apparatus; from 1936 to 1938 they built a *parallel* system of libertarian structures and networks (from the local-

Argentina and South Africa a not insignificant part of the “hyperprecarariat” (a term which I introduced precisely to avoid the expression “*Lumpenproletariat*”) has been responsible for some of the most important contemporary urban social movements (*sem-teto*, *piqueteros*, *Abahlali baseMjondolo*....

level *colectividades* and *pueblos* to the *federaciones comarcales* to the *federaciones provinciales* to the *federaciones regionales*) which co-existed with some tension with the institutions of republican Spain (*Consejo* of Aragon, *Generalitat* in Catalonia etc.) – and the Achilles heel of many of them (the anarcho-syndicalists) was precisely that they compromised *too much* with the state, as Murray Bookchin argued (Bookchin 1994a, 1994b).

When libertarians⁸ say (as they have always said) a decisive *no* to goals such as “seizing state power”, a “socialist state” and “democratic centralism” (Leninist party structures), they are not just reproducing a tradition, but – in contrast to Harvey – also considering the lessons from the past. For libertarians free association, horizontality and mutual aid, communes, networks and confederations are seen as tools and strategies to overcome not only class and class exploitation, but oppression as a whole (including racism, patriarchy, and so on). When libertarians as different as Cornelius Castoriadis and Murray Bookchin are critical towards “historical materialism” because of its epistemologically and theoretically reductionist approach to society and history (and space, I may add), they also have good reasons. It is not that they “ignore” political economy as a part of a critique of capitalism; they just refuse economism and teleology.

Nevertheless, it would be unjust to demonise Marx and Marxism as a whole. In truth, besides well-known 19th and 20th century libertarian thinkers such as Kropotkin, Castoriadis or Bookchin (as well as other European and non-European thinkers who stand close to the libertarian tradition, like Michel Foucault, Felix Guattari and Ivan Illich), and besides the contemporary Latin American and African intellectuals who are themselves activists or co-operate closely with social movements (from *Subcomandante Insurgente* Marcos to Raúl Zibechi), it is fair to recognise that heterodox, non-Leninist Marxists such as Anton Pannekoek, Edward P. Thompson, Herbert Marcuse and Henri Lefebvre are valid sources of inspiration as well.

⁸ According to the *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, the adjective ‘libertarian’ comes from the noun ‘libertarian,’ which means both “an advocate of the doctrine of free will” and “a person who upholds the principles of absolute and unrestricted liberty, especially of thought and action”. In fact, the original French word was introduced by anarchist Joseph Déjacques in the middle of the 19th century, as an alternative to *libéral* (liberal). However, in contrast to the Latin languages, in which *libertaire* (French), *libertario* (Spanish and Italian) and *libertário* (Portuguese) are related above all to anarchism and radical democracy, in anglophone countries (and especially in the United States) ‘libertarian’ is often interpreted as a kind of *ultra-liberalism*, that is a strict defence of the ‘minimal state’ and individualism at its peak. In this text, the adjective *libertarian* covers the heterogeneous set of approaches to society which historically evolved in the context of a two-war-front, in which theoretical and political fighting has taken place simultaneously against capitalism and against ‘authoritarian’ approaches to socialism: from classical anarchism (19th century and early 20th century) to European and US-forms of neoanarchism (from the second half of the 20th century onwards) to European autonomism (*idem*) to the renewed forms of libertarian thinking and praxis which have massively emerged in Latin American countries in recent years (Mexican Zapatistas, a part of the Argentinian *piqueteros*, and so on).

David Harvey gives the impression that movements such as the Zapatistas, *piqueteros* and *Abahlali baseMjondolo* are committed to narrow-minded localism as a goal, while they actually represent a critical and original form of “militant particularism”, more or less in Raymond Williams’s sense:

Of course almost all labour struggles begin as particularist. People recognize some condition and problem they have in common, and make the effort to work together to change or solve it. But then this is nothing special in the working class. You have only to look at the militancy of stockbrokers or of country landowners or of public-school headmasters. The unique and extraordinary character of working-class self-organization has been that it has tried to connect particular struggles to a general struggle in one quite special way. It has set out, as a movement, to make real what is at first sight the extraordinary claim that the defense and advancement of certain particular interests, properly brought together, are in fact in the general interest.” (Williams 1989:249)

However, there is no need to restrict the possibility of transcending “particularism” in a “parochial” sense by means of “politics of scale” (“global framing”, “diffusion”, “scale shift”, “coalition forming” etc.) to the workers’ movement; other social movements have also achieved supralocal relevance (and even networking).

Libertarians have always refused verticality and demanded horizontality. This may sound sectarian or even naïve for most Marxists; but for libertarians, it is not enough to criticise Stalinism or even Leninism – it is necessary to criticise all forms of rigid hierarchy and verticality which are, more often than not, unfortunately reproduced inside organisations of social movements themselves, partly under influence or inspiration of political parties... For libertarians this is the best antidote to prejudices such as those which lead a brilliant scholar like Harvey to consider Brazil’s PT government as very progressive, or to, pathetically, regard the role of China’s Communist Party as a sort of enigma.

Nowadays, many libertarians (surely not all of them) would agree that “*institutional struggle*” in a broader sense should not be regarded as a taboo. (“Institutional struggle” in a broader sense does not mean that activists and movements enter political parties, but that they try to influence public policies, plans and legislation.) Under certain circumstances, this is not only useful but also *necessary* (to avoid isolation, for instance).⁹ However, it is crucial to

⁹ Murray Bookchin developed some innovation in this regard with his “libertarian municipalism” (or “Communalism”) approach, which was an attempt to make libertarians fit for present-day challenges (see Bookchin 1995, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2007c). He was non-dogmatic – perhaps “*too non-dogmatic*”... – to the point of defending that libertarians could take part in *municipal* (not at higher levels) elections, in order to facilitate the tasks of influencing legislation and of building a kind of duality of power: “(...) Communalists try to build lasting organizations and institutions that can play a socially transformative role in the real world. Significantly, Communalists do not hesitate to run candidates in *municipal* elections who, if elected, would use what real power their offices confer to legislate popular assemblies into existence. These assemblies, in turn, would have the power ultimately to create effective forms of town-meeting government.” (Bookchin 2007c:115) However, Bookchin’s approach must be considered with very much caution. It can sometimes make a sense, but only under very

understand and admit that the *state apparatus as such* is an intrinsically and essentially *heteronomous structure*, reforms and *conjuncturally* “progressive” governments notwithstanding.

Therefore, institutional struggle can, in the best of all cases, play a supplementary role in relation to *direct action*; it cannot replace it, and it should never eclipse it. The state is not a “partner” (as it very much is for NGOs); the state apparatus *as such* is an *enemy*, even if it is sometimes (dialectically) more or less genuinely open to pressures from below as a *government*. To which extent this openness can be used by social movements (instead of the movements being instrumentalised by the state), is something which has to be decided on a case-by-case basis. Social movements must learn to deal with the state with pragmatism, but also without illusions.

Hence, as far as the role of institutional struggle *vis a vis* direct action is concerned, we should avoid both dogmatism and naivety. I would like to use two phrases, the first one steaming from Nietzsche and the second one from Spinoza, as “political-philosophical metaphorical epigraphs” to such a discussion:

- 1) “And he who would not languish amongst men, must learn to drink out of all glasses: and he who would keep clean amongst men, must know how to wash himself even with dirty water.” (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*)
- 2) “A good which prevents our enjoyment of a greater good is in reality an evil.” (Spinoza, *Ethics*)

Nietzsche’s words can be used as a kind of metaphor for the following warning: *Do not be dogmatic!*; whilst Spinoza’s words sound like a warning which can be applied to “participation” and other examples of institutional struggle: *Do not be pragmatic to the point of forgetting what is essential, of losing perspective, of becoming domesticated*. Social movements must optimise their ability in combining these two pieces of wisdom with each other, in order to achieve a balance which prevents both co-optation and sectarianism (and isolation).

Social movements must talk and articulate with each other, organise and mobilise in creative ways. Felix Guattari spoke already in the 1970s and 1980s of “molecular revolution” versus “molar structures” – “molar” referring to centralistic and hierarchically unified organisations such as political parties, “molecular” referring to the level of flexible “micropolitics” – and of “transversal organisation” – that is, an organisational form which does not separate the “how” and the “why” of collective activities from each other (in fact a very old libertarian principle) and which *articulate* without seeking for *uniformity* (Guattari 1987a and 1987b). It is not necessary to adopt all of Guattari’s theoretical premises, or his approach as a whole, to admit that his insights still bring fresh air into the debate on organisation forms (from a

special circumstances (for instance, in the cases in which it is not necessary to join a party in order to run for a local office or city council seat), and *never* as a general strategy. In fact, the risk of structural co-optation is probably always very high.

libertarian viewpoint) and that they can be at least partly used as sources of inspiration.

Be that as it may, social movements must continually reinvent themselves, their strategies and tactics, and finally their language, in order to avoid the colonisation of radical slogans and concepts (such as the “right to the city”) and to cope with new and old challenges. Fortunately, this is more than a mere matter of pure theoretical speculation. Several important movements have already done and are doing precisely this, in different countries and under more or less different (and more or less similar) circumstances, from Britain’s *Reclaim the Streets* to the Mexican Zapatistas, from the European social centres movement to a large part of Argentina’s *piqueteros*, from Argentina’s *fábricas recuperadas* (recovered factories) movement to the alter-globalisation movement worldwide, from Brazil’s *sem-teto* to South Africa’s *Abahlali baseMjondolo*.¹⁰

And they must do it sometimes “*together with the state*” (for tactical reasons, and always in a very cautious and limited way), but above all “*despite the state*” and essentially “*against the state*”, as I pointed out elsewhere (Souza 2006a and 2006b). Of course there are still many open questions, and there are many unsolved problems; there are even contradictions inside many movements (after all, we shall not forget that these activists act inside a heteronomous society and that they are exposed to all sorts of material, political and ideological pressures and influences). But only these and other emancipatory movements (and *not* Marxist-Leninist parties) represent a key to overcome these problems in a truly *new* and *liberatory* way – that is to say, a key to the *right to the city*, a key to a *just and free society*.

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¹⁰ It would surely exceed the scope of this text to mention more than a couple of references about these movements. For this reason, just a few sources about the Latin American and African movements above mentioned: see Zibechi (2003 and 2007) for *piqueteros* (and for Zapatistas too, as far as the second book is concerned), as well as Colectivo Situaciones (2002) and Svampa and Pereyra (2004); Rebón and Saavedra (2006) for the *fábricas recuperadas* movement; Souza (2006a) for the *sem-teto*; Pithouse (2008) for *Abahlali baseMjondolo*.

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About the author

Marcelo Lopes de Souza is at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro in the Department of Geography.