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Debates

The right to the city and beyond

Notes on a Lefebvrian re-conceptualization

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One of Henri Lefebvre's last essays, "Quand la ville se perd dans une métamorphose planétaire", published in Le monde diplomatique in 1989, is by far one of his most enigmatic. The title alone says bundles; an atypically downbeat Lefebvre is on show, two-years before death, dying like his cherished traditional city: when the city loses its way, he says, when it goes astray, in a planetary metamorphosis. This article mobilizes Lefebvre's valedictory lament. It does so to problematize his very own thesis on "the right to the city", especially in the light of recent bourgeois re-appropriation. The discussion tries to rework and reframe Lefebvre's celebrated late-60s' radical ideal, propelling it into the contemporary neo-liberal global context, negating it by moving beyond it, affirming in its stead a "politics of the encounter" If a concept didn't fit, somehow didn't work, Lefebvre insists that we should always ditch that concept, abandon it, give it up to the enemy. So, too, perhaps, with the right to the city. The political utility of a concept, Lefebvre says, isn't that it should tally with reality, but that it enables us to experiment with reality, that it helps us glimpse another reality, a virtual reality that's there, somewhere, waiting to be born, inside us. A politics of encounter, I suggest, forces us to encounter ourselves, concretely, alongside others, it doesn't make facile, abstract rights claims for something that's now redundant in an age when planetary urbanization has become another circuit of capital.

One of Henri Lefebvre's last essays, 'Quand la ville se perd dans une métamorphose planétaire', published in *Le monde diplomatique* in 1989, is by far one of his most enigmatic. The title alone says bundles; an atypically downbeat Lefebvre is on show, two years before death, dying like his cherished traditional city: when the city loses its way, he says, when it goes astray, in a planetary metamorphosis

Nobody can ever write as whimsically and gaily about the city, Lefebvre laments, nor with the same lyricism as Apollinaire once wrote about Paris. Now, the situation is more sobering, more depressing; and

somehow the octogenarian author of *Le droit à la ville* mirrors this depressing state of affairs. The more the city grows, Lefebvre says, develops, extends itself, spreads its tentacles everywhere, the more social relations get degraded, the more sociability is torn apart at the seams.

As it extends, as the city urbanizes hitherto un-urbanized worlds, as it urbanizes rural worlds, strange things equally happen to labor markets: they, too, Lefebvre says, seem to get obliterated. Traditional forms of work, secure forms of salaried and decent paying jobs, seem to melt into air as fast as 'urban forms' settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. People the world

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over migrate to the city looking for work only to discover that there's no more work—at least no more dignified 'formal' work, one paying a living wage. Once, they came for steady jobs, for steady factory jobs, but those industries have now gone belly-up or cleared out to someplace cheaper, to somewhere more exploitable and expendable. Thus cities have lost their manufacturing bases, and, says Lefebvre (1989, p. 16), in consequence have lost their 'popularly' productive centers.

Millions of peasants and smallholders across the globe are each year thrown off their rural land by big agribusiness, by corporate export farming, by the 'rational' dynamics of the neoliberal world market; these people lose the means to feed themselves as well as the means to make a little money. So they come to an alien habitat they can little afford or understand, a habitat which is now strangely neither meaningfully urban nor exclusively rural, but a blurring of both realities, a new reality the result of a push-pull effect, a vicious process of dispossession, sucking people into the city while spitting others out of the gentrifying center, forcing poor urban old-timers and vulnerable newcomers to embrace each other out on the periphery, out on assorted zones of social marginalization, out on the global *banlieue*. The urbanization of the world is a kind of exteriorization of the inside as well as interiorization of the outside: the urban *unfolds* into the countryside just as the countryside *folds* back into the city.

All of which, Lefebvre suggests, has now begotten a 'specific dialectic', a paradox in which 'centers and peripheries oppose one another'. Yet the fault lines between these two worlds aren't defined by any simple urban-rural divide, nor by anything North-South; instead, centers and peripheries are *immanent* within the accumulation of capital itself, *immanent* within its 'secondary circuit of capital'. Banks, finance institutions, big property companies and realtors spearhead the formation of this secondary circuit. If

ground rents and property prices are rising and offer better rates of return than other industrial sectors, capital sloshes into assorted 'portfolios' of property speculation. From capital's point of view, as a class, this makes perfect bottom-line sense: the landscape gets flagged out as a pure exchange value, and activities on land conform to the 'highest', if not necessarily the 'best', land uses.

Profitable locations get pillaged as secondary circuit flows become torrential, just as other sectors and places are asphyxiated through disinvestment. Therein centrality creates its own periphery, crisis-ridden on both flanks. The two worlds—center and periphery—exist side-by-side everywhere, cordoned off from one other, everywhere. The 'menace', Lefebvre says (1989, p. 16), is that this amorphous monster we call 'the city' becomes a planetary metamorphosis totally out of control.

Urban society is born of industrialization, a force that shattered the internal intimacy of the traditional city, a force that gave rise to the giant industrial city Frederick Engels documented, yet which has now superseded itself, been killed off by its own progeny. Industrialization has, in a word, negated itself, bitten off its own tail, Lefebvre says, advanced quantitatively to such a point that qualitatively it has bequeathed something new, something pathological, something economically and politically *necessary*: planetary urbanization. Absorbed and obliterated by vaster units, rural places have become an integral part of post-industrial production and financial speculation, swallowed up by an 'urban fabric' continually extending its borders, ceaselessly corroding the residue of agrarian life, gobbling up everything and everywhere in order to increase surplus value and accumulate capital.

Citizen and city-dweller have been dissociated; what has historically been a core ideal, a core unity, of modern political life has, Lefebvre says, perhaps for the first time, perhaps forever, been wrenched apart, prized open. City-dwellers now live with a terrible intimacy, a tragic intimacy of

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proximity without sociability, of presence without representation, of encounter without real meeting. The tragedy of the urban-dweller is a tragedy of having hoped excessively, and of having these hopes serially dashed.

Lefebvre's tonality throughout his essay is Céline-like in its journey to the end of the night; yet he can't quite resist a few Whitmanesque flourishes, throwing out one final thought about what a new democratic vista might look like: it will surely necessitate a reformulation of the notion of *citizenship*, he says, one in which city-dweller and citizen somehow embrace one another again. Indeed, 'the right to the city', he concludes, as a proverbial 'cry and demand', now 'implies nothing less than a new revolutionary conception of citizenship' (Lefebvre, 1989, p. 16).

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As ever with Lefebvre, the latter proposition raises as many questions as it provides answers. Right to *what* 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? And if there are centers everywhere, just as there are multiple peripheries, does that mean the right of these peripheries to occupy, take back, the centers?

A major motif of Lefebvre's right to the city is, of course, the 'the right to centrality'; not a simple visiting right, he says, no tourist trip down memory lane, gawking at a gentrified old town, enjoying for the day a city you've been displaced from, but a right to participate in life at the core, to be in the heat of the action. Yet in a lot of US urbanism this is precisely what many urban-dwellers already have: the right to centrality. Needless to say, it's a right not worth very much, given that those with power and wealth have long suburbanized themselves, long ago fled the

center in favor of the periphery, leaving to the dispossessed the task of reassembling of motley shards of downtown centrality. Power's own centrality, meanwhile, is now somehow a de-centered centrality, a multi-nodal superiority, global in its polycentric potency, rendering hopelessly archaic Lefebvre's singular demand. (Don't people create their own centers anyway, the centers of their own universes, wherever they find themselves? Isn't the right to centrality something internally generated, something existential, and not only geographical? Doesn't the idea of the right to centrality, too, especially when voiced by an elite intellectual, merely reflect a power yearning, a yearning to dominate, to tower over, to master conceptually? It's an impulse, perhaps, very few 'ordinary' people actually have.)

Now, one could justifiably ask: does it still make any sense to talk about right to *the* city, to the city that's mono-centric and clear-cut about what's inside and what's outside? Moreover, is there any political purchase in defining citizenship through something 'urban', especially when urban territoriality is so formless and expansive, so global in its reach? Is the right to the city an empty political signifier? Never before—even more than in Lefebvre's day—has the urban process been so bound up with finance capital and with the caprices of the world's financial markets. The global urbanization boom, with its seemingly insatiable flows into the secondary circuit of capital, has depended on the creation of new mechanisms to wheel and deal fictitious capital and credit money, on new deregulated devices for legalized looting and finagling, for asset-stripping and absorbing surplus capital into the built environment.

Crucial here is a marked penchant for what David Harvey (2003) labels 'accumulation by dispossession', which upgrades Marx's theory of 'primitive accumulation', mobilizing it in a 21st-century neoliberal context. In *Capital*, Marx (1976) said the history of primitive accumulation is always

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epoch-making, always acting as a lever for the capitalist class in the course of its own formation (and re-formation). The process is simple enough: 'the divorcing of the producer from the means of production' (Marx, 1976, p. 875). As written in the annals of capitalism, primitive accumulation, Marx thought (1976, p. 876), took many forms; though in these annals the ink still seems wet:

'when great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled onto the labor-market free, unprotected and rightless. The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil is the basis of the whole process.'

But, in our times, as Harvey (2003) makes clear, primitive accumulation by dispossession signals other terrains for speculation and market expansion: asset-stripping through mergers and acquisitions, raiding of pension funds, biopiracy, privatization of hitherto common assets, like water and other public utilities, and the general pillaging of hitherto publicly owned property

Baron Haussmann tore into central Paris, into its old neighborhoods and poor populations, dispatching the latter to the periphery while speculating on the center; the built urban form became simultaneously a property machine and a means to divide and rule; today, neo-Haussmannization, in a similar process that integrates financial, corporate and state interests, tears into the globe, sequesters land through forcible slum clearance and eminent domain, valorizing it while banishing former residents to the global hinterlands of post-industrial malaise.

Hence the issue: the urban process is now global because it is energized by finance capital; ergo democratization has to be global. However, at the same time, according to right to the city theorists like Lefebvre, we have to separate out the urban realm, give it some political specificity, some political priority in struggles against neoliberalism, even some priority with respect to global citizenship. So, on the one hand, the city needs to

be considered globally because urbanization is global, masterminded by transnational finance capital. On the other hand, in this global struggle the city somehow holds the key, though only if it's considered in the broadest sense of the term, at its broadest territorial scale. The specificity of the city seems to be that there's no longer any specificity; the right to the city is a global struggle for citizenship that needs to be grounded in the city. Perhaps it's just me, but isn't this logic rather tautological? Aren't we left going around in circles?

The problem emerges when we (correctly) identify the dominant role finance capital plays in global neoliberalism, only to then, in the same breath, voice some looser political invocation that 'the urban' must now be the principal site of any contestation of this project. The shift from one to the other doesn't quite stack up; in fact, it strikes as a *political and theoretical non sequitur*. Indeed, even if we accept the 'urban' as a specific terrain for political struggle, one might wonder what would the right to the city actually look like?

Would it resemble the Paris Commune, a great festival of merriment, of people storming into the center of town, when there was a center, occupying it, tearing down significant statues, abolishing rents for a while? If so, how would this deal with the problem Marx identified? How would it deal with the central banks and all those flows of capital and commodities? And why should taking over 'the city' necessarily prevent these transactions, this trade, anyway? Even if people re-appropriated downtown HQs of the big corporate and financial institutions, or squatted Wall Street, how would this really destabilize 'the system'? (Even a so spectacular act of urban dismantling—the downing of the World Trade Center—barely stopped world trading for a day¹)

What's more, if we look at 20th-century revolutionary history, it's clear that wrestling control over urban areas has often been the icing on the revolutionary cake: by then, the social movement has already been built,

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the bonds already forged; taking control of the city announces the culmination of victory, the storming of the Winter Palace, the demolition of the Berlin Wall, the last battle in a dogged war of position, the social movement's final, joyous fling. In many ways, too, revolutionary juices of modern times haven't had their source in the city at all, but have flowed from the countryside onto the urban streets.² It's almost like what Régis Debray said in *Revolution in the Revolution* (1967): that the city has been the 'empty head', largely impotent, deaf to the plight of those who feel accumulation by dispossession the most; that it's the rural hinterlands, mountain jungles and abandoned *banlieues* that is the 'armed fist' of rebellion. 'The city, for the guerilla movement,' Debray wrote (1967, p. 77), 'was a symbol, the purpose of which was to create the conditions for a coup d'état in the capital' (emphasis added). Mao, Che, Castro, Ortega (in Nicaragua) all knew this, and with Subcomandante Marcos they'd doubtless concur: the city doesn't so much radicalize as *neutralize* popular elements (cf. Debray, 1967, pp. 76-77).

The city, from this standpoint, isn't so much a Lefebvrian dialectical *œuvre* as a Sartrean *practico-inert*, the prison-house of past actions, the *formless* form of a passive totality, of inert bricks and mortar that gnaw away, that inhibit *active praxis*. The *practico-inert*, Sartre (1976) insists, opposes active activity because its anti-dialectic announces that dead labor dominates over living labor, that praxis has been absorbed into an objective alien form, into the city itself. And while in *Métaphilosophie* Lefebvre (1965, p. 85) was critical of Sartre's formulation of the urban as *practico-inert*, this understanding nonetheless explains the relative conformity of urban populations today, the majority of whom are ex-peasants and people with rural roots, a million-fold mass such as never existed before, a flow of dynamic people who soon become passive vagrants, unemployed, sub-employed and multi-employed attendants, trapped in shantytowns, cut off from the past yet somehow excluded from the future,

too, from the trappings of 'modern' urban life; instead, they're deadened by the daily grind of hustling a living.

Such a collision of urban and rural worlds, and the complex mix, the entangled loyalties and schizophrenia that ensues, forms the basis of John Berger's novel *Lilac and Flag* (1990), his 'old wives' tale of the city', a fictionalized rendering of the problematic but one which reveals a few facts. Berger's narrator, an aged peasant woman who remains in the village after everybody has left, is leery of the city. For her, when push comes to shove, there are really only two types of people: peasants and those who feed off peasants. Her tale is of Zsuzsa and Sucus, aka Lilac and Flag, two lovers who're trying to tread their slippery way through the spectral metropolis of Troy, a paradigmatic po-mo city of expressways and concrete blocks, of money values and deceit, of immense freedom and brutal imprisonment.

Sucus lives with his mother and father on the 14th floor of an anonymous high-rise on the city's periphery; Clement, Sucus' Papa, came from the village as a teenager and worked all his life opening oysters. One day Clement has a freak accident, gets badly burned, and slips away in hospital. He's always wondered whether his son could find a job. 'There are no jobs', Sucus tells Papa on his deathbed (Berger, 1990, p. 47), 'except the ones we invent. No jobs. No jobs.' 'Go back to the village, that's what I'd like to do', says Clement to his son. 'See the mountains for the last-time.' Half the men in the ward, he says, remember either their village or their mothers; that's all they think about. Sucus' generation, of course, doesn't know the village, so can never go back anywhere; and yet it can't quite find itself in the alien city either, even in the city in which this generation was born. Sucus' generation can go neither backwards nor forwards: it has nostalgia for neither the past nor the future. And yet, they're not prepared to take the same shit their parents did. Their expectations are different. But their prospects are non-existent.

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Berger's *Lilac and Flag* delves into a generation of men and women, a generation of urban-dwellers for whom 'the right to the city' serves no purpose—either as a working concept or as a political program. It remains at a too high level of abstraction to be anything that is *existentially meaningful in everyday life*. Put a little differently: the right to the city politicizes something that is *too vast and at the same time too narrow*, too restrictive and unfulfilling, too empty a signifier to inspire collective retribution, to provoke Susac and his generation to get itself together, to act as a collectivity, as a fused group.

The right to the city quite simply isn't the *right* right that needs articulating. It's too vast because the scale of the city is out of reach for most people living at street level; and it's too narrow because when people do protest, when they do take to the streets en masse, their existential desires frequently reach out beyond the scale of the city, and revolve around a common and collective humanity, a pure democratic yearning. Berger's Susac is a latent political subject waiting in the wings, perhaps even hoping against hope; yet he's waiting for something closer to home, something trivial—something he can touch and smell and feel—and for something larger than life, something that's also world-historical. He's waiting, that is, for a praxis that can somehow conjoin both realms at once, square the lived with the historical, two sides of praxis 'that go badly together' (as Lefebvre [1965, p. 77] says in *Métaphilosophie*).

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If the right to the city won't do, what else might? Are other aspects of Lefebvre's political arsenal more politically fruitful, more empowering for radical politics today? Maybe his idea of the *encounter* can spawn a different way of conceiving the urbanization of the world, and of straddling the dialectic between the lived and the world-historical. Lefebvre (1974), remember, says that the city is the supreme site of encounters,

often chance encounters, especially chance political encounters; but why be so discriminatory? Why not posit the power of encounters as the stuff of radical politics, the stuff that percolates *through the whole social fabric*, through the entire zone of possible militant praxis? The notion of 'encounter', after all, is a tale of how people come together as *human beings*, of why collectivities are formed and how solidarity somehow takes hold, takes shape, shapes up.

The politics of the encounter, too, is something that can mediate between the lived and the historical, between an individual life and dynamic group fusion. It can overcome the inertia of apparent mass powerlessness. When striving individuals encounter one another, when people express their collective power of acting because their *conatus* (in Spinoza's understanding) inspires a desire to exist democratically, a social movement is in the making, a historically significant social movement. Common notions bond people, bond their bodies and minds, and diverse peoples will now likely intersect and intermingle in real and virtual space, in a blurry liminal and subliminal zone in which it makes no theoretical or political sense to differentiate between what's city and what's countryside, between what's urban and what's global.

A meaningful politics of the encounter will replace *passive* affects with *active* ones; it must and will recognize that a 'singular essence' applies to us all, especially to all humiliated and exploited people the world over, who might and can encounter one another not always directly, but intuitively through a mode of relating to the world, through unwritten and unstated common agreement, through solidarity. It has happened before and it will continue to happen in the future, especially in a future where global communications both integrate and separate everybody. Indeed, as soon as people find one another, touch one another ideationally, emotionally and maybe experientially, as soon as *we* begin to reach into ourselves as human beings, we start to piece

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together certain concepts about *our* lives: we universalize, make more coherent what seems, on the face of it, only specific experience—vague, lived experience. And yet, what appears particular is in fact general; what seems just our plight is actually the plight of many people, the plight of a multitude of different people.

A politics of the encounter is potentially more empowering because it is politically and geographically more *inclusive*. Let's forget about asking for our rights, for the rights of man, the right to the city, human rights. A politics of the encounter utters no rights, voices no claims. It doesn't even speak: rather, it just does, just acts, affirms, takes, takes back. It doesn't ask, doesn't plead for anything abstract. It has little expectation of any rights, and doesn't want any rights granted, because it doesn't agree upon any accepted rules, isn't in the mood for acceptance by anyone in power. If it says anything, the politics of the encounter talks a language that the group has only just collectively invented.

When people encounter one another they often do so by virtue of an *affinity* taking hold, congealing at a felicitous moment; only those elements that are susceptible to interlocking will somehow interlock. Needless to say, things have usually been gurgling within the bowels of society: undercurrents, clandestine organization, politicking, subversion, growing dissatisfaction; though when things explode, when they really erupt, when the proverbial shit does hit the fan, it's invariably by *surprise*.

Here affinity becomes the cement that bonds, perhaps only for a moment, but a moment that's enough, a moment that lingers, a lasting encounter, a bonding of people across frontiers and barriers. In desiring another reality, in inventing it, in willing it up, people find their kindred souls, perhaps nearby, perhaps faraway; and in finding one another they struggle together for the realization of common hopes. People create a group commonality because of a taking hold of bodies and minds in a space,

on the street, face-to-face through 'strong-tie' offline activism, and online through virtual 'weak-tie' association. The two flanks strengthen one another and give a new dimension to the idea of taking hold: *speed*, the speed at which crowds assemble, the speed at which demos take place, the speed at which people today encounter other people.

One of the curious things about the recent street demos in Tunisia and in Egypt was that although they occurred in the streets of Tunis and Cairo, in capital cities, the stake wasn't really about the city, but about *democracy*, about something simpler and vaster than urbanism as we once knew it. A lot of the activism and organizing was done deterritorially, *post-urban*, if you will, through Facebook and Twitter, and was essentially leaderless, a sort of series of radical *moments*, Lefebvrian moments that intersected and overlapped. The politics of the encounter is when a 'constellation of moments' (Lefebvre's term) assumes galactic proportions. Here each moment contains the presence of the future, the beginnings of the end of one kind of rule, and the commencement of another. The moment lurks between the lines, Lefebvre says, lurks in a certain context, disrupts linear duration, punctuates it, drags time off in a different, contingent direction, towards another, as-yet-unknown staging post. The moment is a political opportunity to be seized and invented, something metaphorical and practical, palpable and impalpable, something intense but fleeting, too, the delirious sense of pure feeling, of pure immediacy, of being there and only there, like the moment of festival, or of revolution.

Just as alienation reflects an *absence*, an inert, dead moment bereft of critical and dynamic content, the Lefebvrian moment signifies a *presence*, 'a modality of presence', Lefebvre (2002, p. 345) calls it, a fullness, a connection, a social connection of like-minded people. As Lefebvre conceives it, the moment implies a certain notion of liberty, as well as risky game of chance. There are moments of play and struggle, he

says, and of rest and poetry, always with a 'certain specific duration' The moment 'wants to endure', he says (Lefebvre, 2002, p. 345). 'It cannot endure (at least, not for very long). Yet this inner contradiction gives it its intensity, which reaches crisis point when the inevitability of its own demise becomes apparent.' For a moment,

'the instant of greatest importance is the instant of failure. The drama is situated within that instant of failure: it is the emergence from the everyday or collapse on failing to emerge, it is a caricature or a tragedy, a successful festival or a dubious ceremony' (Lefebvre, 2002, p. 351)

Therein lies the problem: one moment leads to other moments, and a politics of encounter explodes when moments collide, collide on the street. Yet how to sustain the intensity of the encounter, how to harmonize it with a continuous political evolution, with an authentic politics of transformation? How to ensure that this moment in everyday life—this spontaneous lived moment—assumes a mutation of world-historical significance?

Nobody can answer the question in advance; nor are there preconceived formulas for success. What's evident, though, is how any moment of encounter will likely be a kind of process without a subject, spreading rapidly like wildfire, a moment in which crowds will become speedy *ensembles of bodies*, created via spontaneous online and offline ordering; participants here will simultaneously act and react, both affect and get affected; a human kaleidoscope will result in which joy and celebration, violence and wildness, tenderness and abandon find structuring, somehow get defined. Participants will congeal not only as a singularity sharing their passions and affirming their hopes, but as a force that creates its own historical space.

For in any politics of encounter, it's not in space that people act: *people become space by acting*. Nothing is scenic anymore, nothing is necessarily urban; nothing is frill or redundant, alienating or thing-like; all action, all

human connectivity, each body, if it really connects, literally fills the space; action breathes, and participants' own bodies become the major scenic element, the spatial form as well as the spatial content. To that degree, the politics of the encounter will always be an encounter *somewhere*, a spatial meeting place. It will always be an illicit rendezvous of human bonding and solidarity, a virtual, emotional and material topography in which something takes hold, something disrupts and intervenes in the parallelism, in the paralysis.

This, in the end, seems a better way to rework and reframe Lefebvre's right to the city: to negate it by moving beyond it, moving through it as Lefebvre implied we should. If a concept didn't fit, somehow didn't work, Lefebvre insists that we should always ditch that concept, abandon it, give it up to the enemy. Indeed, for Lefebvre the whole political utility of a concept isn't that it should tally with reality, but that it enables us *to experiment with reality*, that it helps us glimpse another reality, a virtual reality that's there, somewhere, waiting to be born, inside us. A politics of encounter forces us to encounter ourselves, concretely, alongside others; it doesn't make a facile, abstract claim for something that's all around us and which is already ours.

Notes

- 1 At the United Nations (UN)-organized World Urban Forum in Rio in March 2010, the UN and the World Bank both adopted the right to the city in its charter for addressing the global urban poverty trap. Across the street in Rio, at the Urban Social Forum, a people's popular alternative was being staged. Activists there were appalled by the ruling class's re-appropriation of a hallowed grassroots ideal. David Harvey, who spoke at both events, said when he declared at the World Urban Forum that 'the concept of the right to the city cannot work within a capitalist system', his fellow panelists fell embarrassingly silent (see <http://usf2010.wordpress.com/>). Perhaps it's unsurprising that Harvey's comment should turn off the mainstream; what's more interesting is what it means for leftists.

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does it imply the right to the city is a right that can only be expressed in a post-capitalist reality?

- 2 Lefebvre himself knew this well. Remember how much of his thinking about radical urban politics sprang from rural everyday life, especially from seasonal festivals and raucous, Rablaisian blowout feasts (*ripaille*). Lefebvre's own disposition was a strange urban–rural mix. When describing his physiognomy in *La somme et le reste*, he spoke of his long, angular, urban face—his head of Don Quixote; yet his stocky body was peasant-like (*trapu*), he said, resembling Sancho Panza's (Lefebvre, 1959, p. 242). Lefebvre was proud of this curious combination. He lamented the destruction of the countryside almost as much as he lamented the destruction of the traditional city, even though he knew that in both instances there was no going back.

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