

From critical urban theory to the right to the city

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The right to the city is becoming, in theory and in practice, a widespread, effective formulation of a set of demands to be actively thought through and pursued. But whose right, what right and to what city? Each question is examined in turn, first in the historical context of 1968 in which Henri Lefebvre first popularized the phrase, then in its meaning for the guidance of action. The conclusion suggests that exposing, proposing and politicizing the key issues can move us closer to implementing this right.

I. Introduction: overview and definitions

The main concern of this paper is what I take to be the ultimate purpose of critical urban theory: implementing the demand for a Right to the City. But that is a demand, a goal, that needs definition. Whose right is it about, what right is it and to what city? The paper begins with a look at the actual problems that people face today, and then looks at them in their historical context, focusing on the difference between the crisis of 1968, which produced the demand for the Right to the City, and the crisis we confront today. The question then is: how do we understand the Right to the City today, and how can a critical urban theory contribute to implementing it? The paper suggests an approach to action that relies on three steps a critical theory could follow: exposing, proposing and politicizing. The conclusion presents a perhaps far-fetched idea of what the possibilities for large-scale and enduring social change might actually be today. Is another world not only possible, but realistically attainable?

A word on the use of terms. ‘Critical’, ‘urban’, ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ are four

important words and concepts. (One might argue that ‘theory and practice’ are really only one word in this context, but that’s truer in theory than in practice.)

‘Critical’ I take to be, among other things, shorthand for an evaluative attitude towards reality, a questioning rather than an acceptance of the world as it is, a taking apart and examining and attempting to understand the world. It leads to a position not only necessarily critical in the sense of negative criticism, but also critically exposing the positive and the possibilities of change, implying positions on what is wrong and needing change, but also on what is desirable and needs to be built on and fostered.

‘Urban’ I take to be shorthand for the societal as congealed in cities today, and to denote the point at which the rubber of the personal hits the ground of the societal, the intersection of everyday life with the socially created systemic world about us.

‘Theory’ I take to be the attempt to understand, to explain and to illuminate the meaning and possibilities of the world in which practice takes place. It is, in a sense, the conscious and articulated aspect of practice, of action. It is developed through action, and

in turn informs understanding and undergirds practice.

'Practice' is often spoken of as if it were the Siamese twin of theory, because it is needed for theory and because theory should lead to practice if it is taken seriously. The image is of a theory and a practice that are linked organically, that a critical theory depends on a critical practice and a critical practice depends on a critical theory. But it is not so simple. The Paris Commune, a classical example of critical practice, began with no 'theory', and leading exponents of critical theory saw their work as *Flaschenpost*, in Adorno's words, analysis written down and put in a bottle thrown in the ocean hoping it would some day be retrieved and be useful. But it may have been one of the failings of the mainstream of critical theory that it saw itself evolving independently of practice, and it may similarly have been a weakness of some forms of critical action that they proceeded uninformed and even rejecting critical theory, as in the *We Are the Poors* approach (Desai, 2002) and in some forms of anarchist and communitarian action.¹

In any event, as used here, critical urban theory is taken as analysis that flows from the experience of practice in developing the potentials of existing urban society, and critical theory is intended to illuminate and inform the future course of such practice.

The sections that follow discuss the reality today and its history, the right to the city in terms of whose right, what right and what city, solutions in terms of the formulation Expose, Propose, Politicize and finally, getting to the goal.

II. The reality today and its history

Today

As this is written, two developments shape the context for our analysis: the election of Barack Obama as president of the USA and the deepening economic crisis globally.

The election of Obama was seen as a dramatic event, not only in the USA but in the world. What does it in fact mean? What has changed, and what has not? Answering the question requires exactly critical theory. For the answer is, in conventional terms, everything has changed, but as well, in critical terms, nothing has changed—and it is the ability of critical theory to say what has and what hasn't changed that entitles it to an important place in our thinking and action. What has changed is that the use of racism as a support for economic and social policies that exploit and oppress has become counter-productive, as racism is rejected by more and more people (although not by all) as contrary to their own experiences and values. And we still have institutional racism, so that for every dollar of wealth held by the typical white family the African American family has only ten cents (Lui, 2009, p. A15). What has not changed is the underlying structure of the society in which the election took place, neither politically—this was the most expensive campaign in the history of the USA, and the media's role in it was enormous—nor economically—the Goldman Sachs crew who are running the national treasury, and their economist academic minions, are running the Federal government's economic role after Obama's election as they did before, and the \$700 billion bail-out for the financial sector already authorized will be implemented in full, if not expanded. Even the staid *New York Times* writes:

'Goldman's presence in the [US Treasury] department is so ubiquitous that other bankers and competitors have given the star-studded firm a new nickname; Government Sachs.' (Creswell and White, 2008, p. 1)

Another aspect of the US presidential election campaign that led up to the election result is noteworthy, and ties in with a major argument I want to make here. Both parties ran under the slogan of 'Change'; Obama's was 'Change you can believe in', McCain highlighted his maverick, non-conformist

record every chance he got. Close to 50% saw the change needed as being in one direction, close to 50% saw it in another, but hardly anyone was satisfied with things as they are. If critical urban theory is able to expose the roots of that dissatisfaction, and show both almost equal halves that their dissatisfaction is with the same features of the economy, the politics, the society, it will have done its job.

The other development, already unfolding as the election took place, is the economic crisis. I focus on the USA, but the picture is similar globally. In the USA today, over 6 million households (Credit Suisse, 2008) face mortgage foreclosure, unemployment is rising to a several decades-long high, homeless use of emergency shelters is at an all-time high in New York City, real wages are falling way behind increases in productivity, the gap between rich and poor is growing. The financial crisis seems to be spreading, to engulf more and more people, to cause more and more unemployment, insecurity, hunger and want, a greater and greater dissatisfaction with conditions as they are, with inequality, luxury in the midst of poverty, illiteracy, substantive as well as linguistic, selfishness in place of solidarity, isolation in place of love. But I think it is not a financial crisis spreading to other parts of the economy that we confront, but an economy whose contradictions are erupting in a very visible manner in the financial sector, but only as manifestations of much more deep-seated contradictions which we should not allow to be concealed in the focus on issues of regulation or deregulation in one small excrescence of a fundamentally flawed system as a whole. The problem is not in unregulated credit default swaps or out of control hedge funds; the problem is in exploitation, domination, repression system-wide.

Fundamentally, the crisis comes from a system that both necessarily produces gross material inequality and at the same time produces gross insecurity and emotional discontent and distortions. Greed is not an aberration of the system; it is what makes the

system go. Calling greed 'the profit motive' is a euphemism that tries to justify a system that relies on greed to produce growth at the expense of all other values, and that stifles creativity that does not serve profit. Anti-abortion activists, religious fundamentalists, defenders of 'family values', are as much a reflection of emotional impoverishment as hunger and homelessness are of material deprivation. A society one-dimensional in its driving force produces one-dimensional people, and struggles to be supported by them. The victims of the system include both the materially deprived and the intellectually and socially alienated, as is explored below.

The history of the Right to the City as a slogan dealing with such problems came into widespread usage largely out of the events—the theory and the practice—of May 1968 in Paris, and their parallels worldwide. Further discussion requires a look at that history, what preceded it, how it compares to the events of today.

History: before and after 1968

'Crisis?' Capitalism has always been a system with deep internal contradictions. Marxism has had the investigation of crises at the center of its concerns, and its conclusions are hardly likely to be disproven by current events. In the 20th century, five major crises, five periods of deep-going social turmoil, can be identified. They differ in their severity and consequences in the respective strengths and weaknesses of both the system's critics and of its defenders—a critical point. The five crises are:

- 1917: The crisis after the end of the First World War, and the victory of the Russian revolution, the Weimar Republic
- 1929: The great depression, the triumph of fascism, the New Deal
- 1968: The civil rights movement, the new left, the student protests, the Vietnam War

- 1990: The crisis of really existing socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union
 2008: Today's more-than-financial crisis.

I mention three of these, 1917, 1929 and 1990, only to make an often forgotten point: the range of resolutions of crisis is a broad one, not confined to the kinds of questions that seem to pre-empt public discourse today: do we regulate speculation or not, do we increase welfare benefits or not, do we end this war or not, do we bail out this bank or this business or not, do we put up trade barriers or take them down. Historically, the choices are much broader. As these earlier crises have shown, at the extremes there lie, and have always lain, socialism on the one side, barbarism, in the modern form of fascism, on the other. Neither extreme seems imminent today, if for different reasons—not socialism, for lack of a base that presses for it or might bring it about, and not fascism, because the forces of domination have found subtler and more insidious means of holding on to power than naked violence.² In each crisis, the outcome has depended, not simply on the strength or weakness of the critical forces (and not the quality of their critical theory) but also on the strengths and weaknesses of the established system. Indeed, one key function of critical theory may well be to expose and evaluate both the strengths and weaknesses of the existing system and the ultimate nature of its crises, thus informing practice as to what its strategic potential actually is, as well as analyzing the strategies that that practice might adopt.

After 1917, none of these crises involved more than sporadic violence, and all but 1929 in Europe seemed in reality (if not always in the minds of the participants) remote from the extremes of communism and fascism. But the crises of 1968 and 1990 were different from the earlier ones in one key regard: they did not rest on the material breakdown of the existing system, on the depth of poverty or oppression or material want, but on the combined dissatisfaction of

broad elements of the population with the frustrated potentials that they saw in society—in a sense, resting on injustice rather than, or in addition to, want. The contradiction between the reality and the potential for greater progress undermined really existing socialism in the Stalinist period, but the potential was even clearer in May 1968, in Paris most prominently, but in April of that year in universities in the USA and elsewhere also. In each case critical action represented a new element in the oppositional protest. For the first time on a significant scale, the agitation resulting from the aspirations of the alienated were linked, if tenuously and in constant tension, with the demands of the materially exploited: the claims of the students to the claims of the workers (see Marcuse, 2008). Workers as a whole were not uniformly supportive, and the institutionalized organs of the working class opposed the protests; yet worker support on the ground was strong.

On the other hand, the state against which the protests were directed, the rulers, the capitalists and the underwriters of the establishment, were strong. The context was not of economic crisis; the system was still, in my father's phrase, producing the goods. And the goods it produced satisfied the majority; those aspiring to something more than those goods remained a minority. The protest was defeated.

Today, in 2009, we have in a sense the reverse situation. The system is shaky in its production of the goods, whose delivery relies today more and more on financial arrangements rather than direct home production within the national economy. Foreclosures are up dramatically, with close to 4,000,000 threatened, unemployment is rising, local tax revenues and thus local governmental services are shrinking, public education is endangered, the security of retirements is threatened as pension funds lose large percentages of their value. And things are expected to get worse.

The establishment's response has been widely and deeply unpopular. The largest

financial institutions have taken over the national treasury quite directly in private hands, have in effect privatized the government (quite a reversal of the nationalization of the banks of which Marx wrote in the Communist Manifesto). Goldman Sachs, one of the largest of the private financial banking and speculation firms, now has its members staffing the national treasury, distributing multiple billions of dollars to the biggest banks and financial institutions, those precisely that are universally recognized as having caused the immediate crisis to which they are supposed to be responding. Insecurity is widespread and deep, and the rulers and their lackeys are almost apologetic in their response; Alan Greenspan, as I write this, has admitted he 'overestimated the market'.

Yet the protest has been subdued. Life on the campuses barely notices the crisis. Labor unions confine themselves to asking for limits on CEO pay. Bernie Sanders, the one socialist member of Congress (elected as an independent—socialist is not a label that can get you elected) speaks of nationalizing the banks; no one listens. The media denounce the 'greed' of the bankers; no one blames the banking system and its driving force, the accumulation of profit and expansion of capital. The left intelligentsia speaks to itself, trying to figure out how deep the crisis is; the media erects a wall against fundamental questioning of the system. Socialism remains a bad word in US electoral politics, in which the contenders shy away from it in unquestioning condemnation and speak only of regulation and renewed economic growth.

Critical urban theory can provide some illumination on why this situation exists. It has to do with the question of whose right to the city is involved, who the potential actors, the 'agents of change', are and what moves them either to propose or to oppose basic change.

III. Right to the City

The Right to the City is both an immediately understandable and intuitively compelling

slogan, and a theoretically complex and provocative formulation. What does the Right to the City mean? More specifically: Whose Right are we talking about? What Right is it we mean? What City is it to which we want the right?

Henri Lefebvre popularized the slogan in 1968, but he was more provocative than careful in its usage. The best definition he gave is:

'... the right to the city is like a cry and a demand. This right slowly meanders through the surprising detours of nostalgia and tourism, the return to the heart of the traditional city, and the call of existent or recently developed centralities.' (Lefebvre, 1967, p. 158)

In other places he has it meandering through:

'the right to information, the rights to use of multiple services, the right of users to make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in urban areas; it would also cover the right to the use of the center'. (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 34)

So: *whose right, what right and to what city?*

Whose right?

'Whose right' is a complex question, and one as to which I think an expansion of the existing discussion would be worthwhile—useful both theoretically and in practice.

The question is a long-standing one. Herbert Marcuse struggled with it (Marcuse, 1969). David Harvey (2009) recently called attention to it in today's context:

'I don't think we are in a position to define who the agents of change will be in the present conjuncture and it plainly will vary from one part of the world to another. In the United States right now there are signs that elements of the managerial class, which has lived off the earnings of finance capital all these years, is getting annoyed and may turn a bit radical. A lot of people have been laid off in the financial services, in some instances

they have even had their mortgages foreclosed. Cultural producers are waking up to the nature of the problems we face and in the same way that the 1960s art schools were centers of political radicalism, you might find something like that re-emerging. We may see the rise of cross-border organizations as the reductions in remittances spread the crisis to places like rural Mexico or Kerala.'

The analysis following is new, but I think it is consistent with Lefebvre's, and certainly with my father's. Lefebvre's right is both a cry and a demand, a cry out of necessity and a demand for something more. Those are two separate things. I would reformulate them to be an exigent demand by those deprived of basic material and existing legal rights, and an aspiration for the future by those discontented with life as they see it around them, perceived as limiting their own potentials for growth and creativity.

The demand comes from those directly in want, directly oppressed, those for whom even their most immediate needs are not fulfilled: the homeless, the hungry, the imprisoned, the persecuted on gender, religious, racial grounds. It is an involuntary demand, those whose work injures their health, those whose income is below subsistence. The cry comes from the aspiration of those superficially integrated into the system and sharing in its material benefits, but constrained in their opportunities for creative activity, oppressed in their social relationships, guilty perhaps for an undeserved prosperity, unfulfilled in their lives' hopes. The discussion of the role of art, and of an aesthetic revulsion against the results of the existing order of things, is relevant (Miles, forthcoming). For both, their one-dimensionality eats away at their humanity, and from the same source, but it does it in different ways.

So that there is no misunderstanding, those deprived even of the material necessities of life are as entitled to, and in need of, the fuller life to which the alienated aspire as are the alienated, and the sources of dissatisfaction for both arise out of equally organic and

essential human needs. 'Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Morale', as Brecht said,³ but both are necessary for a human and humane life. Where choices must be made, the demands of the deprived are entitled to priority over the fulfillment of the aspirations of the alienated.

To return then to whose rights are our concern, the demand is of those who are excluded, the cry is of those who are alienated; the demand is for the material necessities of life, the aspiration is for a broader right to what is necessary beyond the material to lead a satisfying life. But to make the discussion clearer, let me digress briefly to a schematic definition of terms.⁴

An analysis in terms of material interests, in somewhat traditional class terms (see, for instance, in urban terms: Marcuse, 1989) along lines of position in the relations of production (somewhat modernized), might be:

- The *excluded* (not in fact an accurate term, for they are in fact a part of the system, without the protections won by the working class for labor, but they operate at its margins).
- The *working class*, the materially exploited (including what is euphemistically called the middle class, i.e. white as well as blue collar workers, skilled as well as unskilled, service as well as manufacturing workers, but underpaid and producing profit for others)—together with the excluded, we may speak of these two groups as the *deprived*.
- The *small business people* (the individual proprietors, the small entrepreneurs, the craftsmen).
- The *gentry* (including the more successful small business persons, professionals, the highly paid servants of the multi-nationals).
- The *capitalists* (owners and decision-making managers of large business enterprises).
- The *establishment intelligentsia* (including much of the media, academics, artists and others active in the ideological aspect of the production processes).

- The *politically powerful* (including most of those in or aspiring to high public office).

Looked at economically, the cry for the Right to the City here comes from the most marginalized and the most underpaid and insecure members of the working class, not from most of the gentry, the intelligentsia, the capitalists.

An analysis in 'cultural' terms, along lines of relation to the dominant cultural, ethnic, and gendered society and ideology, might be:

- The *directly oppressed* (oppressed along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, lifestyle, often called the excluded, but excluded only in this 'cultural' sense, often included in an economic sense).
- The *alienated* (of any economic class, many youth, artists, a significant part of the intelligentsia, in resistance to the dominant system as preventing adequate satisfaction of their human needs).
- The *insecure* (a shifting group, varying with conjunctural changes, e.g. level of crisis, prosperity, including much of the working class and periodically some of the gentry).
- The *hapless lackeys* of power (including some of the gentry and some of the intelligentsia).
- The *underwriters and beneficiaries* of the established cultural and ideological hegemonic attitudes and beliefs.

Looked at from this point of view, the demand for the Right to the City comes from the directly oppressed, the aspiration comes from the alienated.

Demand and aspiration, deprivation and discontent. The demand led to the Russian Revolution, the aspiration led to the fall of the Berlin wall. The demand and the aspiration both surfaced, rather independently, in 1968 (see above), but failed to come fully together; the distance between the deprived and the alienated remained. The description of the World Social Forum's meeting in Belem in 2009 as "The Gathering of the

Distressed' (Ramirez and Cruz, 2009) can be interpreted as covering both material and cultural or intellectual distress. Overcoming that distance, with due priority for the deprived and attention to the alienated, is high on what needs to be done today.

It's crucially important to be clear that it is not everyone's right to the city with which we are concerned, but that there is in fact a conflict among rights that need to be faced and resolved, rather than wished away. Some already have the right to the city, are running it now, have it well in hand (although 'well' might not be just the right word, today!). They are the financial powers, the real estate owners and speculators, the key political hierarchy of state power, the owners of the media.

It is the right to the city of those who do not now have it with which we are concerned. But that is not a useful answer. It is necessary to know who is most deeply affected, who is likely to lead the fight, who will be most likely to support it, what will their reasons be? Contributing to understanding exactly who that is is a contribution critical urban theory should attempt to make. I suggest here it is a combination of the deprived and the discontented who will lead the push for the Right to the City, but the issue can use a lot more attention.

Specifically, I would argue that discontent, and for that matter deprivation, does not automatically lead to support for the claim to the right to the city for all deprived and alienated. The threat of discontent, especially when coupled with fear of unrest from the deprived and the working class, has always worried those on top ('A specter is haunting Europe ...'). The effort to channel that discontent has been a chief task for the lackeys of power, the manipulators of ideology, with the media, the schools, religious institutions, and a variety of business and civic organizations as their allies/targets. The results are seen in a variety of widespread emotional group-based phenomena, circling around issues such as:

- Anti-abortion and right to life
- The right to hold guns
- Anti-tax measures
- Homophobia
- Racism
- Anti-immigrant sentiment
- Religious fundamentalism
- Family values
- Chauvinist war-mongering
- False patriotism
- Elements of sports fanaticism.

And, I would argue:

- Home ownership as the American Dream.

It is tempting to use Freudian terms for the process, repression of discontent and its sublimation in these emotional phenomena, a cathexis in which emotion is attached to these issues and removed from more dangerous discontents, or even realization of discontent (H. Marcuse, 1955; Zizek, 2008). A direct confrontation with this repression/sublimation may have to be a very concrete part of any practical political action to achieve real change.

So I would argue people affected by these phenomena are also among the deprived and the discontented, but the direction of their reaction is quite opposite. It is the basis for the old formulation that the future lies between socialism and barbarism—it is they that provide the base for the barbarism, the ‘national socialism’, but it is a base that can be addressed in a progressive manner also.

The battle thus becomes ever more a battle of ideology, understanding, grounded in material oppression but not limited to it, combining the demands of the oppressed with the aspirations of the alienated.

The organizational form of that opposition needs exploration. Clearly the view that it will be the proletariat that, as a single class, leads the struggle with the aid of some intellectuals is outdated. If in the process of struggle, *social blocs*, à la Gramsci, can develop, something solid will have been achieved. The present debates in the World Social Forum,

strikingly at its meeting in Belem about the nature of that gathering, suggest that a broad theoretical understanding along the above lines might help clarify that it is a single conflict in which all participating groups are engaged, with a single objective, even though the immediate form may be only that of a *forum* (where sympathetic groups around varying issues come together to exchange experiences and debate), or of a *coalition* (a temporary coming together around specific temporally and spatially limited issues), or of an *alliance* (a more permanent coalition), or of a *movement* (less organized, less clear in its ultimate goals but very clear in its solidarity and concerned with multiple issues), an *assembly* (a single, or many single, coming together of multiple groups for varying levels of common thinking, sharing, action). There are other formulations: *networks*, *cross-network convergence*, *network of networks* (Costello and Smith, 2009), but these are formulations that beg the question of what kind of coming together a ‘network’ is—convergence on what, around what? The argument here is that there is a convergence of all groups, coalitions, alliances, movements, assemblies around a common set of objectives, which see capitalism as the common enemy and the right to the city as their common cause.

What right?

The right to the city is a claim and a banner under which to mobilize one side in the conflict over who should have the benefit of the city and what kind of city it should be. It is a moral claim, founded on fundamental principles of justice, of ethics, of morality, of virtue, of the good. ‘Right’ is not meant as a legal claim enforceable through a judicial process today (although that may be part of the claim as a step in the direction of realizing the Right to the City). Rather, it is multiple rights that are incorporated here: not just one, not just a right to public space, or a right to information and transparency

in government, or a right to access to the center, or a right to this service or that, but the right to a totality, a complexity, in which each of the parts is part of a single whole to which the right is demanded. The homeless person in Los Angeles has not won the right to the city when he is allowed to sleep on a park bench in the center. Much more is involved, and the concept is as to a collectivity of rights, not individualistic rights.

The demand is made as a right not only in a legal sense but also in a moral sense, a claim not only to a right as to justice within the existing legal system but a right on a higher moral plane that claims a better system in which the demands can be fully and entirely met.

What city?

Lefebvre is quite clear on this: it is not the right to the existing city that is demanded, but the right to a future city, indeed not necessarily a city in the conventional sense at all, but a place in an urban society in which the hierarchical distinction between the city and the country has disappeared. The demand of the landless farmer in the Amazon in Brazil is not met by giving him *entrée* to a favela in the middle of Rio de Janeiro. As Lefebvre (1967, p. 158) has it:

‘The right to the city cannot be conceived of as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities.’

And in fact not a city at all, but a whole society. The ‘urban’ is only a synecdoche and a metaphor, in Lefebvre (1967, pp. 158, 45):

‘[The right to the city] can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life.’

‘... this from this point on I will no longer refer to the city but to the urban’.

Harvey (2003) formulates well what such a city/society might be in principle; he uses

Robert Park’s phrase: ‘the city of heart’s desire’.

But first, as a precondition for pursuing what is desired, a city where material needs and aspirational needs are met, the needs of the deprived and of the alienated, clarity—up to a point—should be sought as to what such a city would look like.

The principles that such a city would incorporate can be set forth in general. They would include concepts such as justice, equity, democracy, the full development of human potentials or capabilities, to all according to their needs, from all according to their abilities, the recognition of human differences. They would include terms such as sustainability and diversity, but these are rather desiderata in the pursuit of goals rather than goals in themselves.

But there is a limit to how much benefit can be gained from trying to spell those principles out in clear terms today.⁵ Such a city is not to be predicted in detail, as Lefebvre often said (indeed, following Marx and Engels, in opposition to the early utopians—see Engels, 1880).

‘To the extent that the contours of the future city can be outlined, it could be defined by imagining the reversal of the current situation, by pushing to its limits the converted image of the world upside down.’ (Lefebvre, 1967, p. 172)

IV. Solutions: expose, propose, politicize

Given the problems we face today, what are the solutions? More specifically for purposes of this discussion, what is the contribution that critical urban theory can make to those solutions? How can theory inform and help practice—for, while in theory, theory and practice are one, in practice there are real differences, if only that the development of theory and the leadership in practice largely reside in different people, different occupations, different life histories. Our common task, those privileged (to be honest about it) to work in the realm of theory, and those

differently privileged to be able to lead in the realm of practice, our task is to make that link between theory and practice and to make it productive. In other words, how do we go from critical urban theory to radical urban practice?

In my own field, urban planning, an examination of what planning in New Orleans was doing in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina led to a suggestion for an approach I called Critical Planning, and outlined an approach in three steps:⁶ they could be summarized in three words: *Expose*, *Propose* and *Politicize*. *Expose* in the sense of analyzing the roots of the problem and making clear and communicating that analysis to those that need it and can use it. *Propose*, in the sense of working with those affected to come up with actual proposals, programs, targets, strategies, to achieve the desired results. Critical urban theory should help deepen the exposé, help formulate responses that address the root causes thus exposed, and demonstrate the need for a politicized response. *Politicize*, in the sense of clarifying the political action implications of what was exposed and proposed, and supporting organizing around the proposals by informing action. Politicizing includes attention to issues of organization strategy and day-to-day politics. And where appropriate, it includes supporting organization directly with interventions in the media and sometimes raising issues within the critic's peer groups themselves, often academics.

V. The goal of the Right to the City, and how we get there?

If this is the strategy for action using critical urban theory and practice, what exactly is its ultimate goal? So a comment or two on just what exactly is the vision of the society towards which pursuing the Right to the City implicitly reads.

Most immediately, the goal can be read from the main immediate contribution of the Right to the City: the claim is a claim to

a totality, to something whole and something wholly different from the existing city, the existing society. Lefebvre and most of those on the streets of Paris and in the occupied buildings of Columbia in 1968 might call it socialism or communism, but it has various names: a democratic society (Purcell, 2008), or a society supporting strivings for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, as in the US Declaration of Independence, or for liberty, equality, fraternity, as in the French Revolution, or a just society (Fainstein, 2009) or a humane one or one allowing for the full development of the human capabilities (Nussbaum, 1999; also developed by Fainstein, 2009), the potential of humans as a species being (Marx, 1844). What all of these formulations must imply, if the analysis of critical urban theory is correct, is a fundamental rejection of the prevailing capitalist system. What all but the most old-fashioned utopian proposals also have in common is a rejection of the idea that the most desirable future can be spelled out, designed, defined, now, in advance, except in the most broad principles. Only in the experience of getting there, in the democratic decisions that accompany the process, can a better future be formed. It is not for lack of imagination or inadequate attention or failing thought that no more concrete picture is presented, but because, precisely, the direction for actions in the future should not be preempted, but left to the democratic experience of those in fact implementing the vision.

Can an alternative to capitalism really be accomplished, given the proven power of the established system?⁷ Not only is the end product hard to imagine, but the steps leading there are hard to see; anything now on the agenda seems trivial in such a long-term perspective. Many believe that spaces of hope, in David Harvey's formulation (2000), can be found, and many such spaces indeed move in the direction of broader change. There is perhaps general agreement, by Marx, Lefebvre, my father, Harvey and most thinking people, that the seeds of the future must

be found in the present. But what does that, apart from the spatial conceptualization, exactly mean?

A spatial image for the seeds of the future can be helpful (Pinder, 2005; Miles, 2007) and whatever is done will surely have a spatial aspect also.⁸ But a spatial focus has its dangers too: most problems have a spatial aspect, but their origins lie in economic, social, political arenas, the spatial being a partial cause and an aggravation, but only partial. It might be better to see the seeds of the future as sectors. It is clearly possible to have sectors of everyday life that are free of capitalist forms, operating within the capitalist system but not of it, not dominated by it. For shorthand, those are the sectors of the economy and of daily life that are not operated on the profit system, that are within it but not of it, that are not motivated by profit but rely on solidarity, humanity, the flexing of muscles and the development of creative impulses, for their own sake. They will need to draw resources from the for-profit sector, preferably democratically and openly through government, but their own driving force will be found in general principles that are radically different from those motivating the for-profit economy, and principles that can have increasingly wider visibility and appeal.

Such sectors, such areas of activity, already exist, are well known, are sought after. The aspirations of those who are alienated from capitalism lead in this direction. Artists create, teachers teach, inventors invent, philosophers think, young people volunteer, not for profit, but because they believe that is what life is for, that is what they want to do. They come up against the same constraints that make people homeless, hungry, sick, impoverished, people whose demands thus naturally link with the aspirations of the alienated. The ultimate goal of most social movements, and certainly of the Right to the City movement, necessarily leads in this direction: they are not after profit, but seek a decent and supportive living environment. Profit, if a concern at all, is a means to an end, which is not high consumption, social status

or further accumulation, but rather decent living conditions for all. Thus the culturally alienated and the immediately deprived have a common enemy. And that is increasingly recognized, even if its name is not always the same: capitalism, neoliberalism, greed, multinationals, power elite, the bourgeoisie, the capitalist class. Above all, eliminating profit as means and motivation in the political sector, eliminating the role of wealth and the power linked to it from public decisions, is a key requirement for both the immediately oppressed and the alienated.

The logic of attempting to expel that enemy from everyday life, one sector at a time, is appealing. We are moving in that direction, although the present leadership is only being dragged there reluctantly, in health care and in education, two sectors in which the conflict over private vs. public has turned, if only slightly, in favor of public. The opportunity is there in housing. The economic crisis has certainly expanded the government's role in finance, banking, real estate, if always within conservative ideological limits.

A critical urban theory, dedicated to supporting a right to the city, needs to expose the common roots of the deprivation and discontent, and to show the common nature of the demands and the aspirations of the majority of the people. A critical urban theory can develop the principles around which the deprived and the alienated can make common cause in pursuit of the Right to the City. How to politicize most effectively that common ground? We already have sectors of society where the commonality is visible, where action for people, not for profit, is the rule. Think of (unfortunately only some) education. Think of (unfortunately only some) health care. Think of (unfortunately only some) of the arts. Think of space exploration. Think of the environmental movement. Think of the non-profit and cooperative sector in housing. Think of the effort to deepen democracy and expand participation in public decisions, and limit or abolish the role of money in elections and governmental decisions. In each of these, the slogan of *CITIES FOR PEOPLE*,

NOT FOR PROFIT, resonates. Let that be the political cry that embodies the nature of the city to which the right is being claimed. Let it be the cry that forms a noose about one part of the capitalist system after another. Rudi Dutschke, at the peak of the 1968 movement in Germany, spoke of the 'long march through the institutions'. Let us pick them off, separately or together. Let us tighten the noose around the housing system, and move to squeeze the profit out of it, one sector at a time. The subprime mortgage crisis, for example, could be an opportunity to move again in that direction (Marcuse, forthcoming), as social housing was before it. Let us not be afraid to name the common goal, and the common enemy.

A critical urban theory, internally linked to practice, might help get there.

Notes

- 1 I am aware that the school known as critical theory comes at the critical from a different direction, but it is one which, I believe, inevitably leads to this position. I suspect that the root of the differences between my father and Adorno in the Vietnam era was in Adorno's unwillingness to deal with the issue of the seeds and movements for change, which had become my father's major concern.
- 2 Underneath, violence still plays a role, as the level of incarceration in the USA shows, as does right-wing violence against opposition, both left-wing and/cultural non-conformists, shows.
- 3 'First comes eating, then comes morality.'
- 4 Iris Marion Young's 'five faces of oppression' may provide an alternate basis for the analysis I am proposing.
- 5 The point is discussed, and the difficulties shown, in many of the contributions to Marcuse (forthcoming).
- 6 Marcuse (2007). In a further elaboration, I am suggesting disaggregating the three steps into six: *Reflect* (to clarify whose values and the planners' own role), *Theorize* (to understand the roots of the problem, whose immediate form and concrete actors should then lead to the next step), *Expose* (to communicate clearly the realities underlying the problem, the parties and interests involved), *Propose* (to put concrete proposals forward for action), *Disclose* (to make clear the assumptions involved, and the limits of what can be expected), and *Politicize* (to deal with issues of strategy and tactics involved in implementation).

- 7 For a recent honest, thoughtful, approach to an answer, see Ehrenreich and Fletcher (2009).
- 8 See the forthcoming publication of the proceedings of the Nanterre conference on Spatial Justice, and the journal that developed from it.

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