

The struggle to belong
Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings

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**Dissecting the Fordist and Post-Fordist City as Objects to Claim:
Reflections on the “Right to the City”**

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Extended Abstract

Cities are physical incarnations of underlying social, political and economic relations. To seek a right to the city means to either claim a certain role within those underlying relations or to struggle for demands which fall outside of the possibilities for existing relations, thereby transforming them. The right to the city movement as formulated by the collective action and voices of thousands of activists and synthesized into Lefebvre’s 1968 proposal was certainly pushing limits in profound ways. And any limited success the movement might have had in certain spheres has now all but eroded under the churn of market fundamentalism and the reconfiguration of the state as exchange value broker. So, the struggle proceeds.

This piece is a reflection on Lefebvre’s “Right to the City” proposal, at its most basic sense, an expanded proposal for a way of shaping and reshaping urban life, its built environment and the practices therein. Being such a profound proposal, many scholars have dissected and probed the meaning and potential for the Right to the City. We further these inquiries by asking: How do “rights to the city” movements, more generally defined, become proposed, produced, reproduced, abandoned and abolished during processes of social change? Our questioning is inspired by the fact that political-economic regimes frame or adopt rights within their processes of reproduction, while emerging political-economic regimes may adopt new rights and reject old rights already integrated into earlier regimes. That is, struggles for rights sit within the shifting framework of political economic regimes. Indeed, countless past movements won key battles leading to significant openings for rights, profoundly altering underlying relations and structures. We explore these struggles for various “rights to the city” within the 200-year history of the shifting political economy of cities in the United States. By chronicling and analyzing this evolution from revolutionary to ad-hoc industrial to Fordist to post-Fordist urban regimes, we trace those rights which became embedded

within those regimes, and those which were rejected or remained outside, and those which may have been accepted but later rejected.

Movements not unlike the “Right to the City” long pre-dated the 1968 urban rebellions. They fought for things like labor rights, the ideas of citizenship and participation and democratic debate, Women’s rights and the right for freedom from slavery. They also fought for the 8-hour workday and the 40-hour workweek and workplace safety and health and overtime pay. The fight to win these rights for blacks took more than 200 years. Most of these struggles were successful – and these rights were integrated into the dominant process of social reproduction. The 1930s labor movement formed the basis for the bargaining with capital which would lead to economic growth and new social patterns enduring for the next 50 years. But, the most fundamental economic rights stemming from the New Deal are now being dismantled. Some rights were fleeting – the racial integration of war production during World War II, for example, was short lived, and another 20 years was needed for those rights to become permanent. The “free labor” ideal from the revolutionary period was overcome and abandoned by the realities needs of industrial production. The early labor movements (1870-90s, and 1910s) were stamped out, only to rise again during the great depression.

More generally we find that rights are not a static fixture, but get absorbed, rejected, or temporarily adopted, as the constraints of capital and the framework of its reproduction allows. We can see that the potentialities and realities of struggles for rights are ever changing, and become reframed and recast as those underlying regimes of reproduction change. And, indeed, those struggles for rights are often a source of change and transformation of those underlying regimes.