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The Right to The City

Henri Lefebvre developed the concept in 1968. Lefebvre defines the ‘Right to the City’ as a right of urban residents to benefits of urbanization and participation in urban development. Estrangement and socio-economic segregation, such as the “tragedy of *banlieusards*”, are his main themes. In the tragedy, people are forced into residential ghettos, much like camps, far from the city center. The Right to the City, in Lefebvre’s perspective, is an uprising by marginalized groups to reclaim urban space in the suburbs. Gentrification, exclusionary immigration policies, and the absence of participation in urban development characterize the 21st-century cities. This paper explores this concept from the perspective of modern authors.

Mark Purcell focuses on the rights of residents within municipalities and cities. Purcell discusses the factor of property rights or economic gains versus social dynamics (142). He believes that a functional city must maintain a balance of sorts. In an example, he uses Brazil’s City Statute that asserts that all priorities are equal. This means that capitalism and socialism have an equal chance (145). Moreover, he touches on women’s rights and he opines that they must be involved in the development of cities (143). Purcell lists several other rights from Lefebvre’s work: to difference, information, and self-management (146). Rights are an outcome of political struggle rather than God-given or natural. Purcell agrees that the concept is utopian but claims that it is the strength in Lefebvre’s ideology (151). Furthermore, he argues that use value should be prioritized over exchange value, play over work, free activity, and interaction over segregation (Purcell 151). Therefore, Lefebvre visualized a political awakening and autogestion.

David Harvey advocates for urban and self-development. Like Purcell, Harvey believes that cities are ruled by capitalism (Harvey 24). Harvey discusses capitalism from a production aspect. He argues that capitalism causes an influx of products and labor. The surplus is a problem in cities that are characterized by greed and inequality (Harvey 25). Urbanization, however, is the stabilizer of global capitalism (Harvey 30). Harvey argues that modern cities are conflict-prone and socially divided regions (32). The main difference between the two synopses is the issue of conflict. Moreover, social stratification thrives. Both Purcell and Harvey believe that cities are becoming more segregated and social stratification is increasing disparities. Moreover, they both observe gentrification, slums, marginalization, and exclusion in modern cities (Harvey 33). Purcell does not dwell on forcible slum clearance and land grabbing. Harvey (35) believes that forcible displacement even in slums and land grabbing of reserved lands like marshes are to blame for infringement of property rights. Nevertheless, both Harvey and Purcell think that property rights should not supersede human rights and social lives.

The concept describes urbanization and social livelihoods in urban areas. Housing is a right of every citizen. However, modern developers bulldoze houses down in the name of homogeneity and development. Moreover, capitalists and banks repossess houses from owners who are unable to pay for the mortgage. Home and belonging are determined by segregation and region. In cities, slum dwellers and gated community residents have different bargaining powers. Slum-dwellers are mainly from low-income households without property and who live in unsanitary conditions. Gated community residents are mainly from middle and high-income classes. The latter group has more influence on policies. They belong to the elite class that makes the majority of decisions for all urban dwellers. Therefore, the meanings attached to housing homes, and belonging must be accompanied by segregation, power, and capitalism. The concept supports organizing for racial and economic justice through its tenets of housing, social, and participation rights. From the perspectives of Lefebvre, Harvey, and Purcell, the Right to the City advocates for an uprising where the disenfranchised claim their rights.

Potential challenges or pitfalls that surround this concept are entangled with its controversies. To begin with, Harvey advocates for conflict. In his opinion, unprivileged groups cannot claim their rights without a struggle. Although activists and humanitarian groups have been successful in influencing movements, the lack of unity and solidarity between the disadvantaged households discredits the concept. It does not consider the issues of fear and lack of unity among people. Mandatory renovation in China, for example, displaced many slum dwellers because they lacked a unified approach. This problem is also seen in other nations. Those who refuse to vacate their premises or sell out find themselves alone. Therefore, it is easy to forcefully evict them because they lack adequate resources to avert demolitions. Another issue is the lack of resources and a clear difference in monetary power. Developers have more influence and bargaining power. Consequently, it is easier for them to have their way. Moreover, most of the slum dwellers rarely own any property hence the owner of the property determines their housing fate.

Overall, the Right to the City has several convincing arguments. Every human is entitled to property ownership, right to housing, social connections, equitable distribution of resources, and participation in development. The most integral argument is the right to housing. Harvey and Purcell both describe the issue of housing as a source of disparity between the rich and the poor. Moreover, shelter is one of the basic needs of humans other than nutrition and clothing. Therefore, modern cities must account for the problem of shortage in housing and speculation, which increases property pricing. Subsequently, they should design a model that suits everyone. However, this utopian argument, as desirable and humane as it is, is difficult to achieve in a capitalistic society.

Works Cited

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Purcell, Mark. "Possible worlds: Henri Lefebvre and the right to the city." *Journal of urban affairs,* vol. 36, no. 1, 2014, p. 141-154.