



Solidarity Economics and Rights to the Contested City in Belfast

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Is Lefebvre's right to the city capable of extending the abstract meaning of formal "rights" to practical applications? With this question in mind, Brendan Murtagh scrutinizes a self-organization project in a neighborhood on the periphery of post-conflict Belfast in Northern Ireland.

The wave of Occupy protests that followed the financial crisis in 2008 reinvigorated populist claims to the city, specific campaigns around homelessness and poverty, and a broader debate about who and what the urban is now for (Gray 2018). But much of this process of "cry and demand" (Lefebvre 1996, p. 158) was largely just that: an ephemeral protest that failed to mobilize as a coherent project about rights to the city and how and where they should be exercised. Dikeç and Swyngedouw (2017, p. 7) criticized the "infatuation with spectacular carnivalesque outbursts" as incomplete and contentious markers of a new political imaginary or even anticapitalist struggle. Bodirsky (2018) recently questioned the whole notion of rights, their abstracted complexity and contradictory application, and how serviceable they are in making fair and inclusive places.

Certainly, the right to the city has strength as a unifying force, but rights are locked into a (state) juridical system that ultimately adjudicates in the interests of property, not some vague claim to social justice, inclusivity or tolerance (Attoh 2011). As Gray (2018) notes in his analysis of factory takeovers in northern Italy, we are inviting the state to bestow rights *onto* us, which are enshrined in laws that accept and simply reproduce systems of wealth, uneven development and the fundamental primacy of exchange value expressed in property relations. Gray (2018, p. 319) argues that we should displace the right to the city with a more active "take-over-the-city movement" in which the *means* to assert use value over capital is at the heart of a more antagonistic urban politics.

This is not to dismiss *rights* to the city but to connect them more carefully and concretely in Lefebvre's ideas about how rights are actually exercised and made constitutive of modern urban struggles. This paper argues for the contemporary relevance of the "right to the city," not because of its evident morality, but because Lefebvre links it to an active project of placemaking in which the *œuvre* aims to assert and expand participatory democracy against the countervailing forces of division and dispersion (Purcell 2014). Here, he disdains forms of participation where, "after a more or less elaborate pretense at information and social activity, (the public) return to their tranquility and retirement" (Lefebvre 1996, p. 245). Instead, he proposes *autogestion* (self-management) in which workers take control over the means of production in an explicit process of de-alienation, but it is *control* that becomes the central dynamic in displacing exchange value in favor of use value (Lefebvre 2009). Lefebvre (1996, pp. 173–174) sees this moving beyond the factory system in his ideas of "territorial autogestion," in which the rights to "participation and appropriation (legally distinct from the right to property) are implied in the right to the city." In short, it is about the mechanisms of change, the everyday social experiences of the citizenry and, in particular, building a commons through "encounter." Here, people and places at the periphery are mobilized to take meaningful control over the assets, resources, work, services, and places that they need to *use* (Merrifield 2011, p. 473).

The social economy and use value

Gray (2018) also sees the tactical value of Lefebvre's use of rights centered on encounter and communing. The question is: what is it we are encountering each other about, what is being made common and how is participation being used to challenge capitalist modes of accumulation? This, as Harvey (2012) makes clear, needs to be about the production, distribution and use of surplus in which alternative forms of social economics offer important tactical potential. The social economy is a contested arena in the use-exchange nexus, not least because it enables the state to download functions and enact a particular form of Foucauldian "conduct of conduct" by making the poor self-manage their own exploitation (Murtagh 2018). But, as Gray (2018) argues, the poor are *already* implicated in exchange systems through processes of consumption, credit, and housing tenure, and have become incorporated in all sorts of urban regimes over which they have limited control. The mainstream European version of the social economy stresses its solidarity ethics by mobilizing communities to take collective ownership over resources, land, property, goods, and services, with surplus reinvested for exclusively social benefit (Defourny and Nyssens 2014). Social enterprises are the dynamic component in the creation of value, in which profit is generated by trading across public and private markets, not avoiding them, or promising that value extraction and accumulation can happen outside their different rationalities and logics (Murtagh 2018). Here, social enterprises, which are community owned businesses, offer the potential to enact a particular form of territorial autogestion, precisely because they are concerned with the use of surplus and how it is made by price exchange, control of property rights and waged employment.

Segregation, assets and post-conflict Belfast

Belfast, in the north of the island of Ireland, is a city of 670,000 people.¹ It was badly damaged by a combination of deindustrialization and nearly 30 years of conflict between Catholics/Nationalists/Republicans who broadly want to reunify Ireland and Protestants/Unionists/Loyalists who broadly aim to maintain the union with Britain. These ethno-religious identities are highly territorial, with divisions between Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods marked by nearly 90 physical peace lines or interfaces,² in almost exclusively disadvantaged areas. The Good Friday Agreement (1998) brought an effective end to violence, new—if fragile—political institutions, and spatially differentiated economic recovery. Residential segregation between Catholics and Protestants is now down to levels seen before the conflict began in 1969, although this trend is observed overwhelmingly in middle-class areas where labor and housing markets intersect in privileged investment sites, urban "quarters," studentification, and more explicit modes of youthification (entertainment precincts, a new university campus, studio apartments, and so on) (Nagle 2009). A twin-speed city has emerged where sites of modernity, religious mixing and investment are close to, but disconnected from, working-class neighborhoods in the north and west where poverty, alienation, and sectarianism come together to produce especially "wicked problems" (Murtagh 2017).

However, in this "periphery," encounter—especially around economic resources—has been able to revalorize peace lines as useful assets for local communities. Suffolk is a small Protestant public-sector housing estate surrounded by mainly Catholic west Belfast. The Stewartstown Road, which is a main arterial route, effectively forms the peace line but was blighted by violence, fear and dereliction as communities on either side increasingly looked in on themselves for protection and avoidance. In 1994, a group of local women, initially separately and informally, organized a sit-down protest about children being injured by traffic on the heavily used commuter route. This

¹ Editor's note: Belfast has a population of 340,000 within its city limits, and 670,000 in the wider metropolitan area.

² Editor's note: an interface refers to places where segregated Catholic/Nationalist/Republican and Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist residential areas meet. These may be materialized by defensive structures (walls and fences put up by the army and police) called peace lines, mostly observed in polarized working-class neighborhoods.

created a degree of dialogue and trust across the interface that became more formal and eventually resulted in traffic-calming measures, the realignment of junctions, and new pedestrian crossings. The gendered nature of the work was important as the group identified other priorities including local jobs, childcare for women returning to work, shops and services, and the need to prevent interface violence between young people. Separate community forums were established in the two areas to help formalize contacts and to make negotiations both transparent and accountable.

A *Peacebuilding Plan* was then facilitated by a community development NGO and identified the derelict commercial block, burnt-out houses, and vacant land that formed the interface as a potential site for a capital development project. Investment by the EU PEACE program and a US philanthropist of around £4 million was supported by a decade-long community development process that faced down intimidation by increasingly criminalized, misogynistic paramilitary remnants within the Loyalist community (Knox and Quirk 2016). The process resulted in a new entity, the Stewartstown Road Regeneration Project (SRRP), which was constituted as a social enterprise, with four representatives from each community forum and four independent board members. Satisfied with the accountability and representativeness of the governance structure, the state housing authority transferred ownership at nil value of the derelict commercial block and related lands to the group. The result in figure 1 shows the somewhat unremarkable commercial frontage and the childcare center at the end of the block, but it is well used by people from both communities for services, decent jobs, and for the profit it reinvests in each neighborhood. That property rights were bestowed by the state to the community and that ownership enabled the SRRP to create rentier surplus is a troubling one for those who see use value inevitably compromised by entanglements with state and private markets (see Defourny and Nyssens 2014).

Figure 1. The use value of the interface



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And yet, as Figure 2 shows, the community now owns £1.7 million worth of assets, generates a rental income of £190,000 *per annum* and provides 12 new shops and services that were not there before the project started. The *œuvre* is the acquisition of assets, bringing in new forms of collective ownership and exploiting property rights to deliver alternative forms of development, cash income and locally useful services. The childcare center has created 50 new places and the complex now employs 90 people within the local community. This has created salary spending worth £1.49 million, and each year the company makes a profit of £99,000. Under the terms of the

constitution, one third of the profits are allocated to each community forum and one third is retained by the company. This community surplus has funded access scholarships to university, youth programs, education development for children failing at school, as well as environmental improvements. Violence at the interface has been nearly eradicated, 90% of residents support the initiative, and only 14% on both sides together thought that the peacebuilding approach was not effective (Knox and Quirk 2016).

Figure 2. The economic impact of the Stewartstown Road Regeneration Project (SRRP) social enterprise



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Autogestion, peace and the right to the city

Suffolk is still an interface and the prospects for the comparatively small Protestant community are not good, but the project has revalorized a violent and derelict site into something that is now locally useful and sustainable. This is Lefebvre’s periphery, where capital has little interest in its appropriation, but it does show that the modalities of the social economy can create purposeful encounters, structured alliances and—because it fixes on economic resources—new forms of repossession and accumulation. Extending that social ownership over production, consumption and distribution gives weight to “taking over the city,” with all the compromises, trade-offs and ethical entanglements this implies. It can, of course, be read as a form of incorporation but, because it asserts a different form of value and how it is controlled and used, it also opens an avenue—nothing more—to *practically* claim some right to the city and its resources.

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