

Module 1.3

Right to the City: Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey

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Module Structure

Module Title	Section 1: Introduction Section 2: Production of Space Section 3: Henri Lefebvre: Writings on the City Section 4: David Harvey: <i>Social Justice and the City</i> Section 5: Right to the City: Indian Context Section 6: Right to the City: The Way Forward
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Description of the Module

Item	Description of the module
Subject Name	Sociology
Paper Name	Sociology of Urban Transformations

Module Name	Right to the City: Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey
Module Id	1.3
Pre-requisites	None
Objectives	This module gives you a broad overview of the idea of right to the city as propounded by Henri Lefebvre and further expanded by David Harvey. It aims to introduce you to concept that would also help you learn the application of the concept in Indian context.
Keywords	Right to the City; Henri Lefebvre; David Harvey; Production of Space; Capitalism and Urbanization



Learning Objectives

1. To understand the notion of 'production of space' particularly in the context of the urban and how complex economic, political and social processes shape urban spaces.
2. To understand the idea of 'right to the city' as articulated by Lefebvre and to be able to apply that idea to the urban transformations taking place around us.
3. To link global, national and local processes in the context of the urban and understand connections between capitalist processes and urbanization.

I. Introduction

A rapidly growing percentage of the world's population now resides in cities.. In fact, the reader of this essay is most likely an urban dweller. So these questions are for you: How do you see yourself in relation to the landscape that you inhabit? What is the nature of public space in your city? How do people from various social classes, genders, ages, castes and religious backgrounds inhabit the city? In what ways do the inhabitants of the city, contribute towards the construction of public and private spaces in the city? What is the nature of interactions between the residents and the city administrators? In your city, what kind of spaces are occupied by the marginalised groups? It is not difficult to notice that the urban environment around us is changing at a rapid pace. Geographers and other urban theorists have linked these changes to wider processes of globalisation and neoliberalism. Structures of urban governance are changing and are becoming more and more distant, away from the reality of everyday struggles of inhabitants of the city. The possibility that urban residents will have a say in shaping their city spaces is vanishing. Consider, for example, the urban changes that accompanied the organisation of common wealth games in New Delhi. On the one hand, there were massive slum demolitions, and on the other, government invested huge funds on infrastructure projects. During this time, the government tried to cover the face of poverty prevalent in the every nook and corner of the city from the public view in the process of transforming Delhi into a glossy world-class city. .. How are such decisions made? Which citizens of the city get to have a say in these decisions ó to what extent? Who are left out? Purcell (2002) in his paper entitled 'Excavating Lefebvre: The Right to the City and its Urban Politics of the Inhabitant' argues that the neoliberal political environment disenfranchises the citizens of the city and that we need to build upon the idea of 'right to the city' in order to counter such urbanism.

The right to the city is an idea that seeks to transform the nature of urban spaces and whose roots lie in the quest for spatial justice. The idea was first discussed by the French Marxist social theorist,

Henri Lefebvre, while writing around the centenary year of the publication of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* and just before the uprisings of workers and students in May 1968 in Paris (in which Lefebvre was a strong inspiration). These were turbulent times and cities all over the world (Detroit, Tokyo, Prague, Mexico City, etc.) were challenging capitalism, war, patriarchy and racism. While the ground reasons that resulted in these protests varied from city to city, what united them was a sense of alienation which came from living a modern urban life and the political empathy towards their struggles. It is worthwhile to note that Lefebvre was writing at a time when one-third of the world population had come to reside in urban areas (today we have crossed the 50% mark). Lefebvre outlined his vision for the right to the city in his book *Le droit a la ville* (1967) – The Right to the City – where he sought to reclaim the city from the bourgeoisie and from a technocratic rationalism. The book which appears more like a collection of notes is written with a sense of political urgency. *Le droit a la ville* was followed by a more sober, *La revolution urbaine* (1970). Lefebvre's works on the urban have been instrumental in conceptualising the idea of 'urban' both a process that needs to be theorised as it is central to capitalism and as a site for political organising. So even though the urban uprisings of 1968 did not eventually succeed, the sense that the city is the site for social struggle captured the imaginations of the Left of the period and continue to do so today.

The Marxist geographer, David Harvey, who writes on the current conjuncture, where urban processes are inextricably and visibly embedded in global processes, draws heavily on Lefebvre's ideas of Right to the City and Production of Space. Harvey claims that he had only Lefebvre's work to turn to for a Marxist understanding of the city. His book *Social Justice and the City* (1973) brought a Lefebvrian sensibility to the Anglo-American context and was inspired primarily by *La revolution urbaine* alongside Harvey's own reading of Marx's *Das Kapital*. Many of these ideas were further developed by Harvey to write several other books including (but not limited to) *Limits to Capital* (1982), *The Urbanization of Capital* (1985), *Consciousness and the Urban Experience* (1985), *Condition of Postmodernity* (1989) and *Paris, A Capital of Modernity* (2003).

Both Harvey and Lefebvre have engaged with a wide range of ideas from art, architecture, literature, economy, philosophy and politics. However, both of them have insisted on an intense engagement with the urban question and the city as a site that is both reflective of and constitutive of modern social relations. Lefebvre as the director of the Institut de Sociologie Urbaine at Nanterre (1965 onwards) pushed towards making the teaching of urbanism an interdisciplinary subject. Here he also advised his students to observe critically, question and work towards transformation. Keeping all of this in mind, it would be meaningless to talk about the right to the city without a wider understanding of the conception of space as developed by Lefebvre and Harvey and its relationship to urban,

economic and social processes.

II. Production of Space

Bringing in space into social theory, Lefebvre averred that "From Heraclitus to Hegel to Marx, dialectical thinking has been bound up with time" (quoted in Smith 2003: ix). One of his key contributions has been to think about dialectics in spatial terms. This understanding of dialectic differs from a Hegelian dialectic, the thesis-antithesis-synthesis and is extremely open-ended, stressing movement rather than resolution. The dialectic according to Lefebvre "highlights the relationship between form and contents and dissolves stable morphologies to such an extent that stability becomes a problem" (Kofman and Lebas 1996: 10). This dialectic is conceptualised not in binary terms, but more often than not a triad (such as production, exchange, accumulation). These forces are in continual relationship with each other and the shifting balance between them produces particular configurations of spatial and social relations.

Such an approach can be applied to an understanding of how space is produced. Space is seen by Lefebvre as a "product to be used, to be consumed, it is also a means of production; Networks of exchange and flows of raw materials and energy fashion space and are determined by it" (Lefebvre 1991: 85). This continual dialectical process can also be understood by breaking down different moments in space. Lefebvre discusses "conceived space" (*le conçu*) to refer to the abstract spaces that are conceptualised or planned by architects, the State, cartographers or urban planners. An example of conceived space is the grid laid out in a planned city, which parcels land in fixed ways and assigns land use to the properties. The "conceived space" often ignores "perceived space" (*le perçu*), which is the space of popular perception and action. Perceived space then includes the popular meanings that are assigned to the place such as a place can be seen as sacred, centre of power, exalted, etc. However, the fully human person (*l'homme totale*) also resides in "lived space" (*le vécu*). Lived space brings together the spaces of imagination and everyday life.

In modern society this space is suppressed and controlled by the structures of capitalism and state control and yet it lives on in the works of art and literature and in fantasy. Lefebvre's interactions with the artists (particularly, surrealists) and architects of the period and his involvement with radical movements such as the Situationists International helped him develop his ideas on viewing space as political and challenging the taken-for granted notions of space. At a time when the State and capitalist forces were imposing a technical rationality on the lived rhythms of everyday life, Lefebvre was questioning the complacency of those around him and wondering how populations were allowing themselves to be controlled and were quietly accepting the changes imposed in their lived

spaces. The Production of Space argument provides a tool to examine urban space in an open-ended manner paying particular attention to struggles that constitute the form, meanings, actions and subjectivities that are constituted by and constitutive of the space itself.

David Harvey urges us to think about space in relational terms. He argues that as opposed to looking at space as absolute (such as the space of Newton or Descartes), or even as relative (Einsteinian space, where space curves or bends but time remains fixed) we need to conceptualise space-time as a relation. Any event or object in space cannot be understood through a lens of fixed time or space. The particular relation (between objects/processes) is constituted by a range of influences on that space in the past, present and future and the nature of a point is defined by how these would congeal at a particular point. Harvey goes on to illustrate this somewhat abstract understanding by giving an example of him delivering a lecture in a room. To hear him people are situated in a room, a bounded space or absolute space. However, within the room people are located at varying distances from him, and therefore, the reach of his words might be different for different locations or relative space. However, each individual within that room is also constituted by their memories, thoughts, conditioning and so on, and therefore, will relate differently to the content of Harvey's talk or this is a relational understanding of space-time. Space for Harvey can only be understood through human practice. Therefore, space itself is neither absolute, relative or relational *in itself*, but it can become one or all simultaneously depending on the circumstances (Harvey 1973:13 emphasis original). Any understanding of urban processes then requires an understanding of how human activity creates particular spatial configurations and concepts that resolve with consummate ease seemingly deep philosophical mysteries concerning the nature of space and the relationships between social processes and spatial forms (Harvey 1973: 14). Both Lefebvre and Harvey brought this understanding of the production of space to bear upon their analysis of the urban, of how city forms and processes are constituted, and in turn, constitute subjectivities. In the next section, we examine these ideas through their writings on right to the city.

III. Henri Lefebvre: Writings on the City

Le droit a la ville critiqued the notion of the city as a purely mechanical process that is non-ideological. *La revolution Urbaine* developed this critique further by illustrating through a reading of the history of urbanism. Lefebvre discussed how ideology has played a role in the shaping of cities in the ancient, medieval and now the modern period. His aim in these writings was to awaken a political consciousness in the popular imagination about urban processes. Urbanism for Lefebvre was too important to be left purely in the hands of technocrats and bureaucrats.

City spaces are not fixed, but can be seen as dialectically moving between the planned idea and the lived reality, between form and content, between thought and practice. The city according to Lefebvre is an *oeuvre* and not a product; it is a work of art and not a mere conglomeration of economic or political structures and in this oeuvre all inhabitants participate. It is not only wealth that is accumulated in cities, but also knowledge, techniques and art. The city streets, squares, and its monuments are sites for a *la fete*, places of gathering, celebration, and centres of unproductive consumption. Alongside, the city is also a place where the rich and the poor, the powerful and the popular are in conflict over the usage of the city spaces. Giving examples from medieval and ancient cities, Lefebvre shows how the rich and the powerful make use of their wealth to materially and symbolically claim space in the city ó through a pompous building of monuments, fountains and embellishments. The working classes also bring beauty to the city spaces through their festivities and celebrations. However, in modern society the production of products has replaced the creation of things of beauty. In industrialising France, particularly Paris, the poor were being pushed away from the city centre which were then replaced by mundane offices, whereas the well-to-do moved into suburbs effectively emptying the urban centre. These shifts erased the social relations connected with the lived urban spaces of diversity, conflict, of a *la fete* with a more technocratic organisation.

In the *Urban Revolution*, which Lefebvre wrote after the 1968 uprisings, he argued that urbanisation is a site for surplus accumulation and so is a key to the survival of capitalism. He predicted that cities are a crucial focus for any political struggle, particularly those based on class. Lefebvre, sought to emphasise that city spaces are not only to be seen in terms of exchange value, but also their use value. However, both contemporary State-centred planning, and capitalist processes prioritise exchange value. Such a perspective effectively crushes the oeuvre in the city and leads to alienation. The city is a place of encounter, a place where people from diverse backgrounds, classes and imaginations struggle over the shape of the city. Out of this struggle emerges the oeuvre that is the city. However, in the way the bourgeoisie city is emerging the cities are being produced for us rather than by us. Monolithic State-centric planning of the city does not allow for difference and cities have become the sites of expropriation rather than of participation. Lefebvre argues that the inhabitants of a city have rights ó the right to inhabit, the right to participate and right to make the city in their image(s).

The right to the city for Lefebvre is both a cry and a demand. The cry is an expression of the existential pain felt in the alienation of everyday life in modern times. The demand is that we confront with this reality and create an alternative urban reality which is meaningful, less alienating, playful while at the same time, engaged. Lefebvre's demand was for a city that is open to

encounters to difference, to conflict, to pleasures and is in continual dialectical movement. Lefebvre differed from conventional Marxists in his belief that the site for revolution is the city as opposed to the factory floor. However, he was committed to the overthrowing of capitalism and the exploitative structures that constitute it and the right to the city was a move in that direction.

IV. David Harvey: *Social Justice and the City*

Harvey in writing *Social Justice and the City*, sought to bring into conversation those that professed a sociological imagination with those possessed by a spatial consciousness (or geographical imagination). This was also the first major work that systematically sought to use a Marxist geography to understand urban systems. In *Social Justice and the City*, Harvey, moves from a reformist appeal for territorial urban justice to calling for a complete urban revolution. Using Marx, Harvey developed a theoretical understanding of how urban processes act as conduits of capitalist circulation. Ghettos and urban polarisation along with other forms of social exclusion are an inevitable result of capitalist urbanisation.

In a more recent essay entitled *Right to the City*, Harvey quotes Robert Park, an urban sociologist to argue that the kind of city we build cannot be dissociated from the nature of social ties that we would like to nurture, the kinds of humans we want to be and the kind of values we cherish. "Man's most successful attempt to remake the world he lives in more after his heart's desire. But, if the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself" (Park quoted in Harvey 2008: 23). The right to the city as conceptualised by Lefebvre and elaborated by Harvey, is therefore, of utmost importance. It is not merely a right to inhabit the city, but to have a role to play in giving it form. The right to the city is the right to shape the world we live in and so it is a right to shape ourselves. This is not an individual right, and any urban transformation has to be achieved through a collective exercise. However, this is not a right that is evenly or easily attainable as both the State and capital seek to make the city to proclaim power and to resolve crises.

Historically, cities have emerged as a result of geographical and social concentrations of surplus wealth. In that sense, urbanisation has always been a class phenomenon. Capitalism enables surplus to be appropriated from many, whereas the distribution of surplus lies in the hands of a few. Moreover, the perpetual search for profits creates conditions for over-accumulation and surplus labour leads to crises. Harvey argues that urbanisation, a process dependent upon investment in infrastructure, industry, housing, etc, becomes a site to absorb this surplus capital and labour as a

spatial fix. Historically, we can take the example of 1840s Paris, where the crises of unemployment and surplus capital was solved through the implementation of a project to redesign and build Paris at an entirely different scale, complete with wide boulevards and grand shopping arcades. Much of this reconstruction was achieved through State-sponsored and debt-financed infrastructure development ó thus, putting previously unemployed labour to work and fixing the surplus into real estate. This urban transformation of Paris changed the socio-spatial relations in the city. It effectively displaced the urban poor ó the 'dangerous classes' and their 'insalubrious' homes from the centre, it annexed the 'unruly' suburbs through massive road and rail connections and propelled the urban populations into an era of speed. The newly emerging credit institutions enabled the bourgeoisie to strengthen their hold on the city and facilitated the free movement of capital. Paris is often looked at as the model for capitalist-led urbanisation for world over ó cities began to be seen as centres of consumerism, where the tourism industry, fashion showrooms, pleasure cafes, etc, would create a new urban persona. The crises of capitalism was solved (albeit temporarily) through the scaling up consumerism. Following Paris, New York was similarly transformed as were urban centres all over the world. Middle-classes became staunch defenders of private-property with their debt-financed homes in the suburbs and the working classes were uprooted from their homes leading to ghost inner city areas.

This spatial-fix was temporary and once again the world saw financial crises in the 1960s. Alongside the discontent and alienation of modern suburban life, coupled with protests against racism, patriarchy, war all, constituted the urban revolution of 1968. In its continuous search for profit, and recurring crises and spatial-fixes, capitalism has created a world where the nature of the urban process is now global. The housing sector in the United State (US) and now the urbanisation of China, have both been central to absorbing surpluses and fuelling the global expansion of capitalism. The uneven flows of capital are etched onto the spatial forms of today's cities, where unprecedented riches exist alongside increasing poverty. Cities all over the world now consist of gated communities, surveilled streets, ostentatious shopping malls and exclusive clubs. Pushed to the peripheries, are the migrant labourers, the homeless, the poor working classes. Exchange value has taken over use value.

Yet, another consequence of capitalist urbanisation has been the dispossession and destruction of the homes and workplaces of the urban poor. Harvey using Marxist parlance, refers to this process as 'creative destruction'. The new cities are built on the ruins of old forms of spatial and social relationships. The destruction almost always results in the displacement of low-income communities from their neighbourhoods to consolidate the control of capital and put the land to a 'higher' use. The difference in the land prices is appropriated by the capitalist classes and such a process enables

accumulation by dispossession. Contemporary urbanisation under capitalism relies primarily on such dispossessions. Quite obviously, this process is not without its conflicts and contradictions and those dispossessed often take to the streets or the courts to protest and fight for their right to the city. However, as stated by Marx, "Between equal rights, force decides" (Marx 1973: 344).

V. Right to the City: Indian Context

These days we hear a lot of talk about smart cities, or world-class cities. Would the smart city be equally "smart" for all sections of society? Would it be accessible to all? What does it mean to have a world-class city? At a point in Indian history, where we are poised to engage even more intensely with the global economy, it is imperative that we pause and ponder over these questions. Let us take a look at Gurgaon, India's "millennium city" – a city that has developed as a result of coalitions between speculative real estate developers and a public sector that was all too willing to cater to private interests. What is created is a fragmented urban space, where land is parcelled into visible pockets of capitalist accumulation and invisible zones of capitalist exploitation. The migrant populations that labour in the homes, offices and factories of Gurgaon live in urban villages in the peripheries of Gurgaon with no access to the gated communities of the aspirational middle-classes. The disparities are built into the fabric of the city – is this the nature of the new world-class cities that we are envisioning? Urban redevelopment in contemporary India appears not too different from the capitalist transformation of Paris in the mid- 1800s.

So what does it mean to talk about the right to the city in the Indian context? The capitalist model of accumulation has altered the relationship between the State, private sector and civil society in all parts of the world and India is no exception. Gautam Bhan's work on evictions in Delhi shows how there has been a significant shift in the popular discourse about the poor working classes in urban India and how they are represented and governed. He urges us to contemplate on this shift and reflect on how these representations "enables evictions to be understood as acts of governance rather than violations" (Bhan 2009: 131). In order to understand this shift let us look at a few judgments by the Supreme Court of India that is in general seen as the protector of the rights of the ordinary citizens of India.

In a 1985 judgment for the case of Olga Tellis vs Bombay Municipal Corporation, the Supreme Court argued that the right to livelihood is imperative for the right to life and an eviction of the pavement dwellers will effectively then be a deprivation of their right to life. It ruled that the urban poor are not claiming "the right to dwell on pavements or in slums for the purpose of pursuing any activity which is illegal, immoral or contrary to public interest. Many of them pursue occupations which are humble but honourable." The State was chastised for its planning failures and instructed to

resettle those whom it displaced. In several similar cases during the 1980s, the Supreme Court stood firm on its commitment to the welfare of pavement and slum dwellers. By the 2000s, however, the courts adopted a different tone. In *Almitra Patel vs The Union of India* (2000), the courts questioned the very rights of the urban poor to inhabit city space and argued that rewarding an encroacher on public land with an alternative free site is like giving a reward to a pickpocket for stealing. In another ruling in 2002 (*Dhar vs Government of Delhi*), the Court contrasted the unscrupulous citizens with honest citizens who have to pay for a land or flat. In 2006, the Delhi High Court, refused to stop slum demolitions and went on to state that if they cannot afford to live in Delhi, let them not come to Delhi. In India of the 1980s, the right to the city, for the urban poor could be claimed on the basis of their urban residency and citizenship. In the India of 2000s this right has systematically been eroded through law, urban planning and through a discourse that sees the urban poor as pickpockets rather than contributing citizens. According to this discourse, the urban poor with their unaesthetic slums, are coming in the way of the world-class Indian cities. Indian cities are zones of contestation between mobile and powerful global capital, and the more spatially, anchored masses of urban poor.

An illustration of this urban contestation is Dharavi – Asia's largest slum. Owing to the expansion of Mumbai, Dharavi now occupies a central space in the city. It houses 9% of Mumbai's population (about 10 lakh people) over an area of 174 hectre. It is also a hub of entrepreneurial activity and small businesses ranging from leather tanning, tailoring, small manufacturing and recycling units. In order to make Mumbai in the image of the envisioned world-class financial centre, the Municipal Corporation of Mumbai plans to redevelop this area. The proposal is to build high rise apartments to house the existing slum residents effectively freeing up 60% of currently occupied land for real estate development. The Dharavi Bachao Andolan Committee (Save Dharavi Committee) has opposed this renewal programme and is arguing that the tremendous amount of economic activities that happen in Dharavi (a turnover of Rs 4000 crore) will be lost as people will be unable to continue such activities inside flats. A stay order from the high court has currently stalled the project until there is a legal consent of the residents. The Dharavi case shows how the tensions between use value and exchange value play out in capitalist-led urbanisation. It also shows the conflict that has surfaced in several Indian cities between the city spaces as sites of work and city spaces as sites of residence.

In all major cities of India, urbanisation is visibly a class phenomenon. The urban bourgeois, with access to global capital is becoming influential in urban governance, particularly deciding who has the right to the city and who does not. Urban space is being cleansed of hawkers, rickshaw-pullers,

informal workers and the homeless. Urban reconstruction alongside is being pushed in the direction of IT parks, golf courses, gated communities with their private swimming pools and lawns, theme parks, and so on ó spaces open only to the affluent classes. This ònew urbanismö shifts the emphasis from urban areas as centres for production to a centre for consumption and circulation of capital in the built environment.

VI. Right to the City: The Way Forward

One of the criticisms of the idea behind the right to the city is that it is an abstract idea and an òempty signifierö and depends on who is asking for that right. The notion of the right to the city can be invoked as much by corporate interests and the bourgeoisie as by the street dweller. In fact, more and more it is the middle-class people who through mechanisms of power, governance and law (such as the public interest litigation in India) are invoking their right to the city. The right to the city then appears not as a right of the poor to survive, but as an urban materialisation of the aesthetics combined with the fear of the middle classes. Moreover, Lefebvre's formulation of the right to the city has a certain revolutionary appeal, which is somewhat subdued in the way right to the city has been appropriated by national and international institutions. The institutional approach to the right to the city is perhaps more pragmatic and the emphasis is on issues such as housing, livelihood, clean water, etc. However, the totality that characterises the Lefebvrian conception is lost and each one of these rights (housing, livelihood, etc) appears as a fragmentary approach. The transformative potential of Lefebvre's right to the city lies in looking at the city as central to the global capitalist circulation, a collective of multiple and diverse users and a site for appropriation and distribution of resources. Such an approach allows an analytical clarity that can help direct the movement towards socially and spatially just cities.

Let us go back to Lefebvre's argument about the right to the city:

The right to the city, complemented by the right to difference and the right to information should modify, concretise and make more practical the rights of the citizen as an urban dweller (*citadin*) and user of multiple services. It would affirm, on the one hand, the right of the user to make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in the urban area, on the other hand, it would also cover the right to the use of the centre, a privileged place, instead of being dispersed and stuck into ghettos (for workers, immigrants, the marginal and even for the privileged).

The right to the city is an incredibly open concept that takes into account difference, material rights and the right to make the city. This is a right that is earned by living in the city ó by being an inhabitant, by making daily use of the city spaces one is regarded as an urban citizen. The citizens of the city need to take control of the decisions (in an inclusive manner) that shape their city, that

produce urban space and not let it become the playground of global capitalist forces that are essentially seeking a temporary fix for their mobile capital. This could be one way of resisting the intensification of capitalist social relations and global restructuring.

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