

# Democracy and the Right to the City

by

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To say that mainstream democratic theory has avoided the question of local self-government is to put it mildly. In his day, Robert Dahl (1967, 1970) took the matter seriously, but since then the question has been sidelined in favour of other issues related to deliberation and inclusion or globalization and cultural difference. To a casual observer it might seem that everyone acknowledges that there must be *some* measure of local autonomy: how could a huge modern state like the USA be governed without it? Moreover, there is now an important current of European thinking about “subsidiarity” that resonates with older American ideas about federalism (Nicolaidis and Howse 2001). One of the presumptions about democratic reform in other parts of the world – at least, one of the presumptions that Western intellectuals have about it – is that it must involve autonomous, democratic local governments. So, it might be claimed that there is little discussion of the matter because the issue has already been resolved in principle, just like the issue of whether everyone should have the right to vote or whether there should be free and fair elections. What more is there to say that wasn’t said clearly enough many years ago? Who wants to repeat old arguments when there are so many more exciting – and difficult – issues to deal with? If the question of local self-government is raised at all now, it is likely to be in one of two contexts: discussions of direct popular engagement in policy making, which note how disappointing municipalities have been in this respect and then move on to questions about electronic voting and new forms of public consultation; or discussions about the increasing importance of cities, both as human habitats and as locales for engagement with cultural, social, economic, and environmental issues. Nevertheless, what the increasing importance of cities or possibilities for increased popular engagement actually entails in the way local self-government rarely gets much serious attention. The fact that political scientists and political theorists have had so little to say about “the right to the city” at a time when that claim has been advanced in dramatic new ways is a sign that they – which is to say, we – generally have neglected the relevant issues. When political scientists and political theorists abandon the field in that way, the geographers, sociologists, and cultural theorists rush in, throwing around ideas about democracy and politics without engaging with the issues that political theorists need to raise (Castells 2012, Harvey 2012, Graeber 2013, Merrifield 2013).

In this paper, I try to pause and reflect as a political theorist and to do so in light of various ideas, both old and new. My main purpose is to consider how three different rights-claims – the right of local self-government, the right to democracy, and the right to the city – might be read together, so as to pose the relevant issues in a more helpful way. To anticipate, I think that the right of local self-government underpins any and all claims to autonomy, whether for individuals or collectivities like families, communities, cities, or nations. The right to democracy is a claim about the way the right of local self-government should work, and the right to the city is a claim about the object of political struggle, the way of life that is now at issue when people organize to govern themselves democratically in various locales. To talk about democracy or the city in abstraction from the right of local self-government is to misconceive our political possibilities. On the other hand, to read claims to these rights together is to see some old issues in new ways.

## The Right of Local Self-Government

To be “self-governing” appears to be one of our main aspirations. This is how Mill put it more than a century and a half ago:

... [T]he sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. ... His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. ... The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign. (Mill 1991, 14)

However we might criticize Mill’s particular account, the basic idea he is advancing – that we are all entitled to a sphere of individual autonomy and that, as a good rule of thumb, as long as a person is not harming anyone else the person should be allowed to run his or her own life in accordance with his or her own best judgement – is enormously appealing and is in fact very widely accepted, at least here in the West. If pressed for a philosophical justification, many people would go back to Kant, or to one of the many thinkers he has inspired. Nevertheless, there is another way of thinking about the matter, inspired especially by Foucault (2007, 2008): if government, as opposed to simple domination, means working *with* people’s freedom rather than *against* it, that suggests that the intensification of government is likely to involve the intensification of *self*-government at one and the same time. How can we understand this?

The key, I think, is to recognize that the government of the self is not simply for oneself: it is also for others. The first rule of social life is to govern oneself, so as to live harmoniously with others. One may assert one’s freedom and so claim the sphere of individual autonomy to which Mill refers, but the condition of possibility for enjoying that autonomy is a measure of self-regulation or self-government so that one does not intrude on other people’s rights or disrupt legitimate social activities. One can argue endlessly about which activities are legitimate or what rights are to be respected, but it seems obvious that there must be some limits on what a person can do if people are to live together in the same place. The urban condition, in which people who are otherwise strangers to one another are thrown together, highlights this problem dramatically. How can people be expected to use the same streets and public spaces if they do not govern themselves appropriately? And, how can people be expected to tolerate one another’s behavior if there are no limits on what people can do? One way or another, the limits will be established. Whether those limits will correspond to anyone’s philosophical principles is doubtful, but it is clear that even Mill’s principle (or others like it) implies that there must be limits of some sort. If one were to extend his principle – as he himself tries to do in *On Liberty* – the implication would be that the practice of self-government, which characterizes the sphere of individual autonomy, would extend outward, so that it would involve social interactions of all kinds. That people should be self-governing, not just in the small sphere that Mill indicates but much more generally,

seems very much in line with his objectives and liberal thought more generally. But, in this domain of social interaction, the distinction between government of the self and government of others becomes quite blurry.

If I restrain myself so as not to incur other people's wrath or – more generously – to confer some benefit on them or society at large, then I am governing myself in an other-oriented way. If I demand similar behavior of others, I am attempting to govern them. But, my strategy for governing others may simply be to appeal to what I take to be the basic principles of self-government, such as the ones that Mill advances. I urge people to be self-governing in ways that enable a wider sphere of self-government for everyone. I work through their freedom to expand the sphere of freedom. But, this does not mean that I am refraining from my efforts to govern these other people. Quite the contrary, I may be applying intense pressure, appealing to everyone's reason – to principles of solidarity or morality or more pragmatic considerations – while attempting to generate social pressures that push people in the desired direction. When people “choose” to govern themselves appropriately, I am likely to be well satisfied, just as are the public authorities that seek to govern people through their freedom.

What this suggests is that, whatever “the state” or “the government” might do, social life always involves complicated efforts at government and self-government that are scarcely visible to, or simply taken for granted by, the higher authorities. James C. Scott (1998), among others, draws attention to this. The simple point here is that whereas we demand the right to govern ourselves in order to exercise our freedom, we demand that others govern themselves in order that they should be properly restrained. As a generalized ideal, the demand for self-government is *both* a demand for freedom *and* a demand for self-control in the interest of others. As Foucault explained, the effort to orchestrate self-government in order to govern people effectively is typical of liberalism. My point is that it is typical of social life more generally, especially when the simple domination of others is not an option. I suspect that any sort of society involves much more than simple domination, but urban life is especially dependent on complicated efforts to get other people to govern themselves appropriately, efforts that sometimes involve making an example of oneself, by setting a high standard of self-government in one's own conduct. In these circumstances, the government of oneself bleeds into the government of others. Rationalities of government, of the sort that Foucault and his followers (Burchell, *et al.*, 1991; Rose 1999; Dean 1999) have analyzed, are as much rationalities of *self*-government as anything else: preparing to get a job and hold one, learning how to be a good householder, driver, cyclist, or pedestrian, keeping clean and healthy, not making too much noise, dealing with one's wastes appropriately, allowing others to go about their business, taking a responsible interest in public affairs, and so on. As any reader of Kant or Mill recognizes, the demands of being a properly self-governing individual are quite formidable. Freedom, as they understand it, is not just a right: it's a huge responsibility. If you are actually free, you have no one to blame but yourself if you make a mess of your life; and, in any case, a free society can only be maintained by strenuous efforts. People have to be up to the task, and much is required to ensure that they are.

All this seems to point back to the individual, but it is patently obvious that collective action is also required. The question is how the responsibility for such action is to be localized. The simplistic answer is that states must be responsible for coordinating collective action. That really is a simplistic answer, however. No state can have the knowledge or power necessary. There must be many other authorities, and they are likely to be of various sorts and on many different scales. Social life is exceedingly complex, especially under urban conditions. So, the question of localization does not admit of a simple answer: there must be a multiplicity of local authorities if collective action is to be effective. What a “local authority” might be does not admit of a simple answer either. The relevant localities can be neighbourhoods, businesses, sidewalks, public squares, restaurants, bars, churches, families, clubs, sports teams, or whatever. Any locale in which the problem of self-government – including the relation between individual and collective self-government – has to be worked out is a matter of concern. Locales may or may not be geographically specific. Insofar as the issue of self-government relates to human activities, it is the bounds of the particular activities that are most relevant, and those bounds can be established in a variety of ways. Often, the bounds are established in the first instance by the business at hand: are we worshipping, eating, plumbing, or what? But, it is also a matter of who is affected by the activity concerned. The question of self-government is infinitely various, and it is hard to generalize about matters as various as street hockey, morning coffee, on-line solicitation, child-rearing, manufacturing, trading, scientific research, artistic expression, and philosophical debate.

Insofar as the right of local self-government has been considered, it has usually been in terms of the rights of local communities, geographically conceived (Eaton 1900-01). At issue is the order of the state. What are the rights of local communities with respect to that order? Must all such communities be recognized? If so, with what powers should they be endowed? Should they, like natural persons, enjoy rights against the state, or are local governments simply the lowest level of the state itself (Frug 1980, 1999)? If the latter is the case, is the empowerment of local authorities a matter of right or a pragmatic matter, to be determined politically? Generally, there has been great reluctance to empower local authorities as a matter of right because their boundaries seem anachronistic, arbitrary, and often unjust. No one’s map of local communities, however conceived, corresponds with the map of any actually existing state, and so the prospect of anachronistically, arbitrarily or unjustly constituted local authorities claiming inalienable rights against justly conceived measures for the wider public benefit seems appalling. If the right of local self-government is simply a cover for racial exclusion or economic privilege, how can it be justified? I have argued elsewhere (Magnusson 2005) that municipalities may be conceived as political authorities on a different register, apart from the state, but I will not pursue that line of argument here. Instead, I want to make the more modest – and perhaps important – suggestion that the right of local self-government is best understood as a more generalized right that has no necessary connection with the institutions of the state.

The difficulty with *any* theory that links the right of local self-government to the state is that it conceptualizes the former in terms of the latter, and so it either

assimilates the right of local self-government to the right of national self-determination *or* subordinates the former to the latter. From the viewpoint of international relations, the relevant localities are the ones that have been constituted as states. On most accounts, only “nations” or “peoples” have a right to be constituted as states – although there is also the view that states ought to make their inhabitants into nations with state-identities rather than tribal identities if they are to achieve justice. Within these arguments is the pervasive assumption that the relation between national and local authorities is to be determined on the principles embodied in the state, conceived as an entity that embraces both. The constitutive authority is – by definition, on the IR account – national or federal and the presumption is that local authorities must necessarily be subordinate to it. This means having powers that are doled out or withdrawn as a matter of convenience, not right. I am aware, of course, that some constitutions purport to enshrine a right of local self-government, and that there have been efforts to advance such a right as a universal claim (Council of Europe 1985, International Union of Local Authorities 1993), but a close reading of the documents in question suggests that there is always a certain amount of bad faith involved in the most vaunted claims: If push comes to shove, the state has overriding authority, and so the “locality” that *it* represents is endowed with sovereignty, and none other. How could it be otherwise within the logic of the state system?

Part of the difficulty arises from the standard conception of the state as a territorial unit within a system that is itself conceived as a territorial order. The expectation is that local authorities will be defined territorially, and so be based on territorial units *within* the locality recognized as sovereign. Minor territorial units, which lack sovereignty, are necessarily inferior, not only in a legal sense, but politically: they are undermined by nationalist propaganda, which is quite relentless. On the other hand, there is no necessary connection between the idea of local self-government and notions of territorial autonomy. Modern life does not occur within neatly self-enclosed territorial units, and so the idea that local self-government must necessarily be a matter of territorial autonomy is quite strained. Individuals bear their rights as they move about, and the localities within which people operate are marvelously varied. To conceive of localities in non-territorial terms is perfectly reasonable. In fact, the most important localities in liberal societies are non-territorial: they are corporations, non-profit societies, loose associations of the like-minded or similarly interested, religious congregations, partisan organizations, families, clubs, gangs, professions, enterprises, businesses, and what-not. Territorialization is incidental to their purposes, and the boundaries between them can rarely be understood in territorial terms. Nonetheless, autonomy or self-government (in the broader sense that I am invoking here) is always at issue. The right to be self-governing in every locale, be it territorial or not, seems extremely important. How else can the proper balance of freedom and responsibility be achieved? In this context, questions about territorial local government seem secondary.

Another consequence of linking local self-government to the state is that it poses questions of government or self-government very narrowly. Unless there is an obvious show of sovereign authority, “government” does not seem to be involved.

Recent efforts to distinguish “governance” from “government” turn on the idea that government is what states do in their own name and that whatever else happens by way of ordering people’s lives is in a different category. I think this is misleading. Government is not an activity peculiar to the state and – as Foucault points out – it was not even particularly characteristic of the state until the modern era. Children are governed by their parents and by other close relatives: that has always been so. The employees of businesses are governed by their employers. We are all governed by the market in its various guises. Some of us are governed by precepts interpreted by religious authorities to which we defer. Many of us are governed by codes of professional ethics, which may or may not be enforced by authorities associated with our professions. We are governed informally by passers-by on sidewalks, fellow members of audiences, and fellow participants in social activities. Government is a pervasive and necessary feature of social life. The fact that the state may attempt to orchestrate government for various purposes, as well as to engage in it directly is important, but local self-government is likely to happen anyway, with or without the state’s permission. The question is what right or rights of local self-government should there be?

The standard tendency is to elevate the right of national self-determination above all other rights of local self-government, in order to establish the principle of national sovereignty. When we loosen the grip of the state on our political imaginations, however, we can see that the principle of local self-government is more general, and the right of national self-determination is subordinate to it. If we are to be self-governing, national autonomy may or may not be necessary, but self-government has to occur in many different locales, which cannot be read off a simplistic account of the territorial order of the state. Unfortunately, it is hard to say which localities, if any, should be privileged in relation to others. The standard liberal idea is that only the individual and the state can be privileged, for fear of giving “intermediary” authorities<sup>1</sup> the power to override the rights of individuals. This is a simplistic response, however, which turns on exaggerated ideas about sovereignty. If the state is imagined as an authority that can generate and maintain a strict legal order, then anything that drains or counter-acts that authority is liable to be suspect. On the other hand, liberals want to endow “individuals” with sovereignty as well, and when those individuals collaborate with one another they are bound to produce intermediary authorities. Such authorities are no more or less dangerous than other ones, constituted on different principles. If we are not simply individuals and our sociality is multifarious – as it evidently is – then it seems evident that intermediary authorities of many different types will arise, only some of which will point back to the state or the individual as the source of their authority. This will only seem a problem if we assume that all forms of political authority have to be on the same register, namely, the axis between the individual and the state.

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<sup>1</sup> To call these authorities “intermediary” is actually to beg the question. No doubt they are intermediary between the individual and the state, but that is not usually how they see themselves. Most of them are on a different register entirely: in other words, they understand themselves to be authorities of a different sort, whose legitimacy is derived neither from the state itself nor from the social contract that supposedly incorporates people into the state.

Notions of “civil society” tend to be parasitic on the idea of the state, but more general conceptions of “society,” “economy,” and “culture” often break free from this. Since the eighteenth century at least, there have been efforts to imagine society (or culture, or the economy) as self-organizing and hence as on a different register from the state as such (Smith 1993, Hayek 1960). In such conceptions, a civilized order emerges willy-nilly, with or without the state’s support or surveillance, and so the question of the relationship between individuals and the groups of which they are part appears quite different. It is not a matter of rights and obligations under the sign of the state, so much as it is of social, cultural, economic, and religious loyalties, affiliations, interests, advantages, solidarities, ideologies, *etc.* One asks what brings people together and what holds them apart. The answers are quite various. In relation to all this, the state seems like a shadowy, if ominous presence. Seen in this way, many questions of government and self-government arise, but on different registers from the one we use to make sense of the relationship between individuals and the state. Only if the state is sovereign in a very strong sense do the various registers collapse into one. That there should be *no* such collapse is actually fundamental to the idea of a “free society”. If people are to be self-governing in a meaningful sense they need the latitude required to form up in many different ways, some of which will arise from their concerns as “individuals” and some of which will arise from their social, economic, cultural, religious, and other connections with one another.

The ongoing tendency to identify politics with the state – despite the fact that everyone recognizes that there is politics everywhere – makes it difficult for us to see that the question of how we are to organize ourselves in these various ways is always fundamentally political. One issue is how the “self” in self-government is to be conceived. To think of the self merely as an individual, or to imagine that everything that we otherwise are is just a derivative from our lives as individuals, is to deny the richness and diversity of humanity. Although I can recognize myself in the shadowy individual of liberal discourse – I am a child of my times and my society, after all – that representation of who I am belies most of the social relationships that give meaning to my life. Were I *only* an individual, I would not see much point in living. For me, as for most people, life’s meaning arises from a variety of connections and relationships, ones of family, friendship, professional and ideological commitment, political loyalty and *concern* in the widest sense of that term. So, it’s those connections and relationships rather than my bare individuality that have priority in my thinking. I make nonsense of them when I consider them in terms of *individual* interests and concerns. Things actually work in the other direction, from the connections and the relationships that have ontological priority to the individual interests and concerns that flow from those connections and relationships. *That* suggests that the relevant “self” in discussions of self-government is a collective self, and not just an individual one. The idea of a right to *local* self-government helps us to think the issues through, so as long as we keep reminding ourselves that all these issues are political.

To say that these matters are political is to say two things simultaneously: that they relate to the way that we are governed and that, as such, we are free to challenge the form and practice of the government we endure. If Foucault is right,



and if I am right in extending his insight as I do here, the government we endure is bound to be at least partly a matter of *self*-government, however much it might be orchestrated externally. So, there is always self-government, and it is always localized in some fashion. Nevertheless, it may be localized in a way that the balance is very much in favour of external government, as opposed to self-government. When we complain about this we are demanding *self*-government, rather than external government, and insisting that the relevant rights and responsibilities be localized so as to facilitate self-government. In some situations, the rights of the individual may be the ones at stake, but often the relevant self is collective: a family, an association, an enterprise, a neighbourhood, or a community, variously conceived. Although it seems to me that the principle of local self-government has democratic implications, there is no doubt that it may be invoked to support claims to autonomy on the part of bodies that do not pretend to be democratic and that derive their legitimacy from other principles. That is certainly a matter of concern, but it is essentially the same concern that arises when individuals use their rights in ways that are illiberal, anti-democratic, or anti-social. The limits have to be worked out politically.

### The Right to Democracy

The right to democracy can and should be posed in relation to the right of local self-government. As my analysis so far has suggested, the right to local self-government is inchoate and as such its content must be filled in politically. As Rancière (1995, 1998) has suggested, democracy is best understood in terms of the relationship between the “part that has no part” and the authorities that govern everyone. When the latter are challenged by those who are excluded by the manner of their inclusion, the challenge is political in the most fundamental sense. What is at stake? It may be the right to the city, as I discuss in the next section, but it is also the right to local self-government. Everywhere authorities arise that are premised on something other than the equal capacity of people to govern themselves appropriately. Expertise is claimed, prior rights are asserted, or largeness of vision attributed to the few who claim the right to govern everyone else. Every claim to democracy is a challenge to this familiar pattern in which the few claim the right to decide who is to be included, what matters, what is to be done, and how. In capitalist societies the most egregious denials of democracy are in businesses that are constituted so as to give “owners” – as well as the managers and consultants who work on their behalf – the exclusive right to decide what is to be done, despite the fact that ordinary employees have much more at stake than owners whose investments are spread across many enterprises. Nevertheless, we also encounter such denials elsewhere: in neighbourhoods whose fate is determined by outside authorities, institutions that are not accountable to the people they are supposed to serve, and activities that benefit the few at the expense of the many. Democracy is more the exception than the rule in so-called democratic societies.

Although apologists for existing regimes make many arguments to the contrary, the practice by which “sovereignty” is attributed to states that then claim the right to exclude “non-citizens” from their territory is clearly undemocratic.

Statist assumptions make it difficult for us to see these matters appropriately. It is more helpful if we begin from everyday life. Supposing that everyone in a particular place is rightfully there – and how could that not be?<sup>2</sup> – what can we make of the idea that the right to democracy and the right of local self-government should be read together? In the first place, it seems to me that a *prima facie* case for democracy is implicit in the right of local self-government. If I have a right to govern myself as an individual, and so do you, then it seems to follow that when we come together, in whatever way and for whatever reasons, we normally have an equal right to a say in whatever we have to decide collectively. Although there may be reasons for granting some people special rights or privileges, those reasons have to make sense to the community, collectivity, or association as a whole, or at least to the major part of it. There are many difficult questions about what that might involve, but it is not sufficient for some people to say that they have the right to decide things because they were here first, own property, have more expertise or experience, are better or wiser or more attuned to God’s will or to the nature of things. Such claims can only be adjudicated by the wider body of people interested in or affected by the activities concerned. The second implication of reading these rights together is that democracy itself appears to be a matter of local self-government. The abstract notion of “the people” is not very helpful, because the people do not all live together, nor do they all follow the same way of life. We inhabit different parts of the earth, and do different things. The problems we have to deal with are specific to those places and activities. The principle of local self-government is that matters have to be decided by the people concerned, not by any external or superior authority, and this is crucial to democracy. Given the way that we are spread over the earth, and our activities are differentiated, democracy has to be localized if it is to be democracy at all. The third implication is that localization and democratization go together, because scaling down makes it easier to accommodate more voices, allow for discussion and deliberation, take account of local knowledge, adjust to particular circumstances, reflect cultural differences, and be sensitive to idiosyncratic views. Only on a small scale can we have democracy in its fullest sense. Beyond that, we may have representation, accountability, and public debate, but only by a stretch of the imagination can we call the arrangements “democratic”.

With respect to territorial authorities, there is an obvious absence in most places. There is no authority sufficiently empowered and properly democratic at the level of the “neighbourhood,” by which I mean the area in which people live their day-to-day lives. Transportation and communications are now such that many people live their lives at many different scales simultaneously, some of which may be global or national or regional. This makes questions about the appropriate way to localize authority very difficult, because people’s lives are clearly not enclosed within small communities. Nevertheless, the absence of small-scale authorities is quite striking, given the fact that people do live in neighbourhoods and carry out many of their activities close to home. This is particularly true of people who are not independently mobile, or who care for such people in their homes. There are some

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<sup>2</sup> Everything depends on the nature of the place at issue, of course. A home is not the same sort of place as a city or a country.

reasons for thinking that people ought to be more connected to their neighbourhoods as places and to their neighbours as fellow citizens, but in any case neighbourhoods matter as places where rules are developed and enforced, formally or informally, and where decisions have to be made about all manner of things from land use and waste disposal to traffic and transportation, public services and facilities, and mutual support and assistance. Neighbourhoods are on a scale that would allow for democracy in its fullest sense, but the general tendency – especially in cities – is to resist any devolution of authority to this level, supposedly on the grounds that “higher” authorities know better or are more responsive to the wider general interest. This is a striking instance of “zero-sum” thinking: democracy at one level is denied on the grounds that something else is required at another level. In fact, there is little reason to suppose that neighbourhood democracy would impair wider capacities: quite the contrary.

Unfortunately, there is a tendency to displace authority upward or outward on specious grounds, and the effects of this on people’s political capacities – as well as on their ability to control things of immediate concern to them – are quite negative. Why should people take an interest in or engage with issues if they know that higher authorities will probably over-rule any decision taken locally? Although university faculty often mock arrangements for decision-making in their own institutions, we are used to more collegial arrangements than the ones that prevail in most other institutions, and so we may be less sensitive than we should be to the debilitating effects of authoritarianism in work-places. Lateral work organizations are more common than they used to be, but such organizations are extremely vulnerable to the caprices of investors or managers seeking to restrain costs or maximize returns, or to the demands of authorities that wish to impose a particular agenda. All this we know well in universities. If democratization is simply a matter of engaging people equally in matters that are subject to the whims of others, it is not especially appealing, but if authority is localized in a way that actually enables democratic self-government, that is a different matter. Most reforms on offer, such as for “citizen engagement” or “employee participation,” presuppose a pattern of authority that alienates and centralizes it. It’s in this context that people may be deluded into thinking that a shift of authority from presidents and prime ministers to mayors might be democratizing (Barber 2013). Democracy is not about empowering the likes of Michael Bloomberg, Rahm Emmanuel, Boris Johnson, and Rob Ford, nor does the localization of authority in their hands enable any “self” but them and their cronies to self-govern. Correctly understood, as principles of critique, the right to democracy and the right of local self-government undercut all claims to hierarchical authority. Unfortunately, the apologetic literature that identifies democracy with existing institutions in the West and implies that we already have as much in the way of local self-government as is appropriate obscures the critical force of these principles.

It should be obvious that both capitalism and statism are inconsistent with democracy and local self-government, but to acknowledge this would be inconvenient for reformers who want to make small changes that would not be too disruptive. Unfortunately, small changes are liable to be negated by adjustments that maintain the present pattern of centralized, hierarchical authority. Witness the

effects of introducing provisions for referendum, recall, and initiative in the United States a century ago, or measures for proportional representation elsewhere. Large businesses, private foundations, and wealthy individuals have ample means to offset or exploit such provisions, none of which directly threaten their prerogatives in any case. The authority of the state is also left intact. More subversive changes are implicit in reading the right to democracy into the right of local self-government and the right of local self-government into the right to democracy. The *a priori* right of the people in any neighbourhood to govern themselves democratically is at odds with the hierarchical authority of the state and the *a priori* right of any group of workers to govern themselves democratically is at odds with the hierarchical authority of the market. What follows is that the common form of small-scale voluntary organizations, which is more-or-less democratic, is the proper model for businesses and governments. At present, the modeling often goes in the opposite direction, in that small-scale democratic organizations are urged to mimic the hierarchical forms of larger organizations in the name of market efficiency or bureaucratic accountability.

Sometimes these matters are considered under the rubric of an expansive right of association, which draws attention to one of the most important aspects of the right of local self-government. People have to be free to form up in the ways that make most sense to them. This is connected in turn to the right to democracy. Unfortunately, associational rights are often considered in abstraction from rights to *govern*, which, I have argued, are bound up with rights of *self*-government. Those rights to govern were at the forefront of socialist thinking in the wake of the First World War, when there seemed like a real possibility of transforming existing capitalist societies into something better, at least in some countries (Cole 1920, 1921; Webb and Webb 1975; cf. Follett 1918). What is notable in retrospect is the careful attention then given to the divide between “functional” and “territorial” authorities, both of which were supposed to have powers of government, both of which were to be democratized, and all of which were to be coordinated in some fashion under the rubric of rational planning. Because these thinkers rejected the idea that the economy should be in private hands, they were much more sensitive to what might be involved in democratizing commerce, industry, and finance, as well as public services more narrowly conceived. They understood that the rights of workers or service providers could not be ignored, nor could the rights of consumers. These rights had to be balanced against those of territorial communities. Much of the relevant discussion was quite sophisticated, but in retrospect it is clear that visions of a socialist future were too static. Unless there is scope for people to re-form themselves, and so generate new forms of authority, there can neither be the freedom nor the dynamism associated with modernity.

Recent attention to “the encounter” (Merrifield 2013) or “the event” (Badiou 2005) is helpful in this respect, because it reminds us of the importance of momentary interactions, including moments of transformation. The double issue is this: how are we to maintain openness and yet ensure that events or encounters are primarily democratic in tone and substance? I say primarily democratic, because it is hard to imagine how anti-democratic movements might be eliminated without imposing a kind of totalitarian control that would be inconsistent with both

democracy and local self-government, to say nothing of rights of association. I also think that it is important to consider events and encounters in relation to movements, because we live in a world of movements. Capitalism and statism may be the most powerful of the constitutive movements of our time, but there are other important movements, and democratization is largely about nurturing and supporting particular ones among them. It wouldn't be hard to come up with a tentative list of potentially or actually democratizing movements, including feminism, environmentalism, and an array of identity-based movements that enable oppressed, excluded, or marginalized people to claim a place of dignity, self-expression, and self-government for themselves. The simple point I am making here is that neither a right to democracy nor a right of local self-government can be articulated in abstraction from such movements. The structures with which we have to contend are ultimately the effects of movements, and will be changed if at all by movements, and so movements have to be our primary matters of concern.

Unfortunately, the persistent tendency is to analyze these matters under the sign of the state, and so to introduce false distinctions between the state and society, the state and the economy, or the state and the market. Such distinctions are usually tied to structuralist accounts that emphasize legal distinctions, such as the ones between public and private, citizenship and ownership, sovereignty and property. Even more important, they are tied to the belief that there is or could be a sovereign centre from which the distribution of authority could be managed. That imaginary centre is usually identified with the state, thanks to its legal status as the sovereign authority. The difficulty, as we all know, is that the world does not conform to the legal distinctions, and so what we have to deal with is rather different. In my own conception, which I have tried to work out elsewhere (Magnusson 1996, 2000, 2011), the world is best understood as a global city constituted by an ensemble of movements that generate their own spatio-temporalities, which may or may not be co-extensive. Moreover, there are proliferating practices of government and self-government that help constitute this world and are matters of legitimate political concern. In this world, there is no sovereign centre, except in the imagination, and what we have to deal with is a complex interplay of movements and practices whose effects can never be fully anticipated in advance. Transformations are always non-linear and hence inherently unpredictable. Order is always temporary and local. There is always a multiplicity of political authorities in different registers and at different scales. If there is any form to the whole it is a matter of self-organization, and civilized order is more dependent on practices of self-government than it is on any plays of sovereignty.

In such a world, local self-government – in the general sense that I have been articulating – is bound to be both a matter of fact and a matter of concern. The purpose of asserting a right of local self-government is to resist the tendency to alienate and centralize authority on specious grounds. The purpose of asserting a right to democracy is not only to support the right of local self-government, but also to resist the tendency to use it for exclusionary or exploitative purposes. Holding these principles together becomes the analytical and political challenge, but to see them in relation to the right to the city clarifies the issues. If we have any model of what it means to govern ourselves in our everyday lives, it is to be found in the

streets around us, and more generally in the urban order that we reproduce every day. This is an order generated by the proximate diversity that Jane Jacobs (1961) and her followers (Sennett 1970) have highlighted. Cities are not just problems: they are also solutions, which arise from people's capacity for self-government. Nurturing that capacity is crucial for democracy.

### The Right to the City

Henri Lefebvre's idea of a right to the city (1996, 2003), which was frequently invoked twenty years after his death during the upheavals of 2011, turns on the idea that "the city" in the largest sense of that term – the urban world that people have created, and within which most of us now live – is actually our common inheritance, the work of our ancestors and the everyday work of all those who sustain, reproduce, refashion and redevelop that world. It does not belong to anyone in particular. It belongs to all of us, as humans. Just as the land was once conceived as our common inheritance, so now the city can be so conceived, not just because it contains the most important of our means of production – and hence our means of livelihood – but also because it is an expression of what we are and can be. Not only do we produce and distribute what we need or want by urban means, but we also define ourselves as humans by these means. Although we share the biosphere with many other forms of life, and no doubt have grave responsibilities toward them, the city is our own creation: our own *oeuvre*, in Lefebvre's terms. Our right to it is implicit in the fact that we have created this particular environment for ourselves; we nurture it, sustain it, live within it, and depend upon it. The anomaly is that some people claim this world as their exclusive possession, force others outside of it, and include the rest on terms of servitude. The analogy with feudal regimes, in which access to land was granted only on the basis of servitude, is quite apparent. To describe either the results or the practices that produce these results as "democratic" is little short of obscene.

What, then, might be involved in vindicating the right to the city? The most obvious thing is access to the urban world as such. This means access to the places that we have constituted as cities, but it also means access to what we do there, what we produce, and what we express of ourselves. At stake is access to what Wirth called a "way of life" (1938), one that now spreads out from cities and colonizes the countryside. We may understand this in terms of an enlarged sense of citizenship, following the logic that Marshall (1950) and others have traced (Isin 2002). Whatever the language we use, it is not hard to specify the most pressing issues of access – to housing, employment, child care, education, health care, transportation, and social assistance. Most people in the world have inadequate access to these things, and so their right to the city is greatly impaired. Quite apart from this, cities and their suburbs and ex-urbs are being constructed, developed, and maintained on principles of exclusion that are meant to secure the few at the expense of the many. The elaborate security systems that are meant to keep the many out of the West – while letting some in under strict conditions of servitude – are mimicked internally, in the form of gated communities and securitized downtowns and suburbs. The authorities in cities generally work against the right to

the city, so as to secure the familiar hierarchies and exclusions. It is in relation to *that* that local, democratic self-government seems most remarkable – especially in the encampments and informal settlements where the disfavoured many come together.

In Lefebvre's understanding, the right to the city was a revolutionary demand and that is how many, if not most of its proponents now understand it. Personally, I think that the idea of "a revolution" is tied to a sovereigntist imaginary, and hence to a conception of political possibility that is at odds with what an urban world is or can be. Nevertheless, it seems clear that what is at stake in this claim is a challenge to the whole order of privilege and exclusion that characterizes the modern world. It is not just a matter of having a right to this or that, but of having access to that world in full, access that depends on localizing and democratizing authority appropriately. Access cannot come as a gift. It has to be achieved politically, through what Ingram (2013) calls "cosmopolitics from below". Such a politics is partly about breaking through exclusionary claims to property and sovereignty, and partly about asserting a democratic right of local self-government. Properly understood, that right is non-exclusionary. Moreover, it entails heavy responsibilities, not only toward other people, but also to the rest of the biosphere.

As I have argued, self-government is as much a matter of responsibility as it is of right. Once we get away from the individualizing logic that characterizes most liberal theory, we can see that the problems rights-claims are meant to address are essentially ones of political organization: How should we localize authority? How can we democratize it? How can we deploy it to overcome the divides that separate us from our life in common? How can we situate ourselves in this world that is partly of our own making, and partly not? Taken in isolation rights-claims can be particularistic and self-interested, but read together they can be open and expansive. They suggest matters of concern, rather than definitive solutions. Moreover, they illuminate one another, in terms of both the problems they raise and the solutions they offer.

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