

A Postcolonial Approach to the Right to the City

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Summary

A postcolonial approach to the right to the city involves the intersection of two multifaceted topics that has yielded an extensive body of scholarship. On the one hand, a postcolonial perspective conceives knowledge production as connected to the colonial matrix of power—a process that resulted in a narrow, Western-centered understanding of the world. On the other, the right to the city, a political motto associated with the French Marxist Henri Lefebvre, focuses on rebalancing the power over urbanization processes by embracing citizens' prerogatives to co-participate in decision-making concerning the city.

Tackling the debate on the right to the city from the standpoint of postcolonial spaces includes exploring a range of social, political, economic, cultural, and spatial axes that offer renewed engagements with the “urban question” from across the social sciences and humanities. In this sense, it is essential to question the universal grammar of the “city,” considering urban changes and local variations, as well as the metrocentric tendencies in the dominant urban theory, such as the concentration on large cities based on a normative and Eurocentric conception of urbanity.

A postcolonial approach to the right to the city takes various processes, histories, experiences, projects, spatial perspectives, and agencies into account, considering epistemological and political proposals from the Global South. Critical Urban Theory, for instance, has analyzed varied contexts, times, and places to determine current patterns of urbanization under global capitalism and their far-reaching consequences for contemporary urban life, especially for groups at the margins. In the early 21st century, Postcolonial Urbanism, whether led by political and social movements or scholars, has drawn attention to how imperialism and colonialism have profoundly shaped city landscapes and positioned urbanism within a singular script centered on Western capitalism, modernization, and progress. Both perspectives outline a critical call to rethink and decenter the debate on the right to the city, confronting topics related to contemporary urban dynamics. These topics may include but are not limited to the new designs of citizenship and agency, center-periphery relations, city-making processes not restricted to the Western system of meaning, urban precarity, housing displacement, gentrification, environmental racism, and the costs of housing injustice in different geographical contexts.

Keywords: The Right to the City, Postcoloniality, Global South, Critical Urban Theory, Postcolonial Urbanism

Subjects: Histories of Anthropology, International and Indigenous Anthropology, Sociocultural Anthropology

The Right to the City: An Overview

In order to formulate our intended postcolonial framework, we shall first retrace the meaning of the concept of the right to the city at its origin and determine the reformulations it has undergone throughout different contexts and times.

In a passage of “Le Droit à la Ville,” a manifesto published in the magazine *L’Homme et la Société* in 1967, the French Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre states that the right to the city announces itself as “a cry” and “a demand” (1967, 34). However different they may be, the expressions should be understood as complementary prerogatives: a demand from those who survive in precarity because they lack the minimum material conditions for a dignified existence in the city and, thus, find themselves deprived of fundamental rights; and a cry of those who aspire to a fair society, since urban life limits human potentialities. According to Peter Marcuse:

The demand comes from those directly in want, directly oppressed, those for whom even their most immediate needs are not fulfilled: the homeless, the hungry, the imprisoned, and the persecuted on gender, religious or racial grounds. . . The cry comes from the aspiration of those superficially integrated into the system and sharing in its material benefits but constrained in their opportunities for creative activity, oppressed in their social relationships, guilty perhaps for an undeserved prosperity, unfulfilled in their lives’ hopes. . . . For both, their one dimensionality eats away at their humanity, and from the same source, but it does it in different ways.

(Marcuse 2009, 190)

Lefebvre recognized the intrinsic political value of the urban condition. Although the city was denied to specific groups of people, at the same time, it constituted a space of potential human emancipation and the creation of better futures. The right to the city implies a radical transformation of the city form and organization and a substantial renewal of urban life, which has been deteriorated by consumerism and the empire of money (Lefebvre 1967, 35). This change would only be possible if it started from the living and creative experience of people contesting the city as a space of encounter, not as a means for economic-financial profit.

It is worth recalling that Lefebvre’s text was written on the centenary of the publication of the first volume of *The Capital* by Karl Marx (1867), and in the context of a series of crucial historical and intellectual events. The global context included the civil rights movement in the United States, the anticolonial struggles in Africa and Asia, the challenges regarding the Vietnam War, the rise of the new left in Europe, the student and workers’ protests in France, and the rise of progressive governments in Latin America, etc. At the same time, an atmosphere of criticism toward the socio-spatial effects of the capitalist mode of production in the city was sweeping through the academic and political fields in Europe, in general, and France, in particular.

By introducing the right to the city, Lefebvre brings social and political tensions to the center of urban space production and urbanism itself, which he understood as a technocratic apparatus of life management of the ruling classes and the bourgeois state (Lefebvre 1974). Nevertheless, rather than addressing the factory and the labor environment, both representative of the capitalist city and its modern rationalization, the French sociologist has transformed the urban question into an open field of social, cultural, theoretical, and political dispute (Busquet 2013; Costes 2010).

The genesis of the notion of the right to the city is therefore shaped by *praxis*, which condenses a twofold aspect in Lefebvre's work: one aimed at questioning the limits and potentialities of urban theory and urbanism; and another founded on political street protests and the pragmatic creation of another city and another future (Lopez de Souza 2010; Tavolari 2016).

The right to the city implies citizenship and participation, demands linked to their correlates, democracy and consensus (Jacobi 1986; Maricato 1985). This conceptual level includes, for instance, policies of access regarding housing, sewage disposal, employment, and mobility. However, it is not only a matter of demanding a right in the legal sense of the term, which is materialized in constitutions and codes of law. It means demanding the fulfillment of ethical prerogatives based on the principle of social justice. Hence, the concept also refers to a fundamental right produced by citizens who democratically transform the space they live in—the city as a “human deed,” not as a “product of capital,” in Lefebvre's terms (1967, 30).

As a demand, the right to the city implies that the city must be approached as a dynamic space of encounter and creation, a political arena for class struggle, as well as a space for disputes that can eventually be violent. In this sense, some scholars prefer to distinguish the “rights *in* the city” in the plural and the “right *to* the city” in the singular (Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer 2012; Kuymulu 2013; Mayer 2012; Tavolari 2016). The former would concern, more concretely, the right to housing, public transport, and facilities; access to leisure and political representation; and participation in local decisions. The second would require the city's radical transformation in substantive terms, allowing the establishment of a new self-governed, self-managed, and more autonomous form of social organization (Purcell 2013).

Bianca Tavolari (2016) and Margaret Crawford (2011) believe that the right to the city is a demand that, over fifty years after its conception, manages to integrate the greatest number and diversity of collective actors despite the multiplicity of meanings attributed to the term. Many other scholars complement this statement by asserting that it is precisely because of this multiplicity of meanings that the right to the city continues to project such a wide range of connotations under the same banner (Agier 2015; Attoh 2011; Brenner 2013; Demazière et al. 2018; Fernandes 2007; Harvey 2011; Künkel and Mayer 2012; Kuymulu 2013; Leitner, Peck, and Sheppard 2007; Marcuse 2014; Pardue and Oliveira 2018; Parnell and Pieterse 2010). In other words, the right to the city is not merely a concept mobilized theoretically by academics, nor a political slogan recycled by social movements without a theoretical and methodological foundation or analytical form. Its operationalization spans across the public sphere, the academic realm, the state, civil society, and a wide variety of international organizations.

New engagements with urban theory have enhanced the concept and the effectiveness of the right to the city, and it is now regarded as a common political claim for more decent, fair, and solidarity cities. The challenge is how urbanism can include the underprivileged in public city-making processes by deepening democracy and developing a participation framework without losing track of the dynamics of the cities of the Global South and specific urban formations, such as unregulated growth, spatial segregation, marginalization, informality, and illegality.

New Engagements with the Urban Theory

Over the course of the 20th century, a consensus was established within mainstream urban theory that studying urbanized societies would be studying how the city functions and how, through internal dynamics, it reinforces, mediates, and articulates the effects of modern life, within cultural, symbolic, cognitive, political, and socioeconomic terms. This consensus was based on the belief that the current period of human history could be identified not only as global but as an era in which urbanization processes had become globalized (Brenner 2009; Brenner and Schmid 2014; Davis 2005; Merrifield 2014; Storper and Scott 2016).

The urban experience has become an arena of numerous scholarly quarrels (Castells 1978; Harvey 1973; Lefebvre 1991), which imposed massive challenges on urban theory. In this field, two theoretical trends, or intellectual movements, have brought essential questions forward: Critical Urban Theory and Postcolonial Urbanism. Critical Urban Theory has analyzed varied contexts, times, and places to determine current patterns of urbanization under global capitalism and their far-reaching consequences for contemporary urban life, especially for groups at the margins of society that demand the right to the city. Postcolonial Urbanism, whether led by political and social movements or scholars, has drawn attention, on the one hand, to how colonialism has positioned urbanism within a singular script centered on capitalism, modernization, and the imperative of progress, and, on the other, to how it has shaped city landscapes and a variety of processes, histories, experiences, and projects on the Global South.¹

Critical Urban Theory

Although it is not a homogeneous paradigm or a school of thought, Critical Urban Theory has become a significant intellectual movement within urban studies. Its genesis can be traced back to the late 1960s and the early 1970s, in works by Western Marxist theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Manuel Castells, and other radical writers (Brenner 2009; Jacobs 1961; Katznelson 1992; Merrifield 2002; Rossi 2018).

Influenced by Marx and Engels' critique of political economy, intellectuals of the Frankfurt School <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199756384/obo-9780199756384-0189.xml?rskey=YI6cWd&result=1&q=Frankfurt+School#firstMatch>, and the "spatial turn" of the 1980s (Löw 2016; Soja 1989; Warf and Arias 2008), Critical Urban Theory rejects hegemonic urbanism, marked by utilitarian approaches and captured by the imperatives of economic efficiency. By opposing the mechanical maintenance of existing urban paradigms,

Critical Urban Theory shows that the urban issue is, above all, a political issue; the city, in turn, must be understood as a space for the construction of social justice, democracy, freedom, and sustainability.

Marcuse (2009) explains that “critical” refers to an evaluative approach to reality as it is presented to us, aiming at a precise understanding of its driving forces. Any critical theory needs to challenge the conditions of the possibility of a certain state of affairs rather than accepting the world as it is. It is also about exposing a positive critique, drawing out the potential for change that the city itself carries at its core. This twofold approach enables us to observe what is wrong with the city, what generates injustice, and what needs to be changed forthwith, but also what emerges as a potency to be built by its protagonists. By “urban,” the author means a synthesis of multiple determinations, that is, the intersection of everyday life with the socially constructed world around us. By “theory,” Marcuse considers the attempt to understand, explain, and project plausible and collectively outlined solutions to empirical problems. In other words, theory is the conscious and articulated aspect of practice, which only has a reason for being in action: practice informs understanding as theory strengthens action.

Critical Urban Theory deals with two phenomena that generate a series of structural inequalities and injustices within cities: ideology and power. On the one hand, theorists are concerned with the geographies of relationships of power, dealing with how domination is spatialized, and how power is materialized within the environment built in the city. On the other, they are interested in how power operates ideologies that overshadow, conceal, or naturalize specific spatial arrangements asymmetrically, by empowering certain privileged social groups that exclude and segregate historically disadvantaged groups.

An example where these two phenomena—power and ideology—are confronted is a gender-based analysis. As Miranne and Young (2000) demonstrate, the adoption of a feminist perspective plays important roles in Critical Urban Theory, which include challenging its epistemological foundations as well as its empirical assumptions. Feminist critique has focused on what McDowell (1983) called the “gender division of urban space,” questioning conventional distinctions between the public and private spaces regarding different aspects of women’s lives, such as the experience of violence, the feeling of insecurity, and the daily negotiation of working time, urban mobility, and social reproduction (Massey 1994; Oswin and Pratt 2021; Peake 2016; Wekerle 2000).

By shedding light on the capitalist production of urban space, Critical Urban Theory also shows how the city has been designed and built as an origin, a means, and a result of historically determined power relations that generate injustices of multiple kinds. However, this theoretical project is not only committed to the deconstruction of privilege but above all to the construction of alternative urbanistic processes (Maricato 2011). This means that urban studies overall should separate the present from the possible or, as Brenner (2019) prefers, provide space for “alter-urbanizations,” other possibilities of urban systems that are more inclusive and provide people with more dignified lives.

The program of alter-urbanization is close to the idea of the right to the city, as it perceives the city and public urban spaces as environments produced through disputes, eruptions, and antagonisms of various natures. The purpose of Critical Urban Theory is to build the right to a city without inequality, injustice, and exploitation. This is not a utopia but a horizon of expectations that shall be created since emancipatory alternatives are latent within existing urban experiences and practices.

In this sense, Critical Urban Theory can aid in the understanding of who is involved in the struggles for the right to the city, who are the potential actors and “agents of change,” what moves them to propose ruptures or to oppose a certain state of affairs (Marcuse 2009). These demands are not only restricted to individual access to the resources offered by the urban space—systems of services, equipment, and public spaces—but imply the power to reinvent the urban space according to collective needs.

For this reason, some scholars have considered the right to the city as a demand for an urbanism built from the “bottom-up” (Iveson 2013; Kuymulu 2013). In this context, urban planning should be understood as an expertise that does not merely lie on the technicality and pragmatics of the capitalist state or market. Such planning also lies in the competencies of organized civil society for “city-making” (Agier 2015)—that is, to feel, live, interpret, and accommodate their needs, experiences, and demands within the daily, democratic city-making.

Since the early 21st century, Critical Urban Theory has expanded such concerns to a more global dimension. Under a neo-Lefebvrian perspective, which predicts the extension of society and the urban fabric toward a “complete urbanization” (Lefebvre 1970), the city has been seen as a fertile ground for the rise of democratic movements in an era of “planetary urbanization.” By planetary urbanization, authors such as Brenner and Schmid (2012, 2014) understand a set of social, political, and economic processes with a specific spatiality where they place global capitalism above all other forces and at the center of the investigation of urban theory. As a result, the authors devote greater attention to the global space disproportionately shaped by the capitalist system, relegating local issues to contingencies of the global structure that dominates the planet.

The political counterpoint of such a process would be the antiglobalization movements of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, such as the protests in Seattle in 1999, which aimed to challenge the concentration of power, wealth, and privilege in the hands of global elites, as well as the World Social Forum and other new global movements from 2010. For Merrifield (2014), this is a “new urban question” galvanized by the wave of insurgency sweeping worldwide. These movements have had the effect of extending the reach of Lefebvre’s ideas on the right to the city, which some have reframed as the “right to the global city” (Borja 2007; Purcell 2003). According to this perspective, the inhabitants of the city—especially the main characters of the transnational movement of people, such as migrants, expatriates, and refugees—must have a voice in the decision-making processes regarding the space that hosts them. After all, these people are not “deterritorialized subjects”—as are, literally, the mega-corporations of financial capitalism—but subjects whose experiences produce the space of the contemporary global city (Purcell 2003).

Postcolonial Urbanism

The revitalization of cities as *loci* of popular mobilization has led to heated debates regarding the meaning and political relevance of Critical Urban Theory (Yiftachel 2009). These debates have been characterized by the clash between a neo-Lefebvrian approach, which emphasizes the new planetary urbanization, and a postcolonial and Global Southern perspective, which challenges urbanism as an imperial political technology with its one-dimensional notions of city and planning, especially when restricted to experiences in Western urban societies.

Leading the debate, Ananya Roy highlights two problematic aspects of the Critical Urban Theory. On the one hand, she inquires, “from where on the map do we produce the body of authoritative knowledge we are willing to acknowledge as theory” (Roy 2015, 9). On the other, she challenges Brenner’s (2009) notion that we would be living in a moment of globalization of urbanism, which would lead us to believe that critical theory is, inescapably, a critical urban theory.

Influenced by Subaltern Studies, so-called Postcolonial Urbanism poses fundamental questions that scrutinize the “right to the city” from a Global South perspective in the early 21st century:² which “right to the city” are we referring to? What does “right” mean when urban segregation deprives part of the population of the minimum conditions for a dignified urban life? Can the liberal notion of citizenship encompass the prerogatives of all people living in cities? Is it plausible to continue to operate within the same normative idea of the city as the sole explanatory framework of the organization processes of life, especially when referring to peripheral contexts? What processes does planetary urbanization refer to when it universalizes the historical conjuncture of the global circuit of accumulation of capital, since this affects countries, cities, groups, and people in an unequal and situated way?

Within this context, Ananya Roy (2011b) introduces the idea of “subaltern urbanism.” She rejects apocalyptic and dystopian narratives that perceive the urbanization process of the Global South as synonymous with *favelas* (slums) or precarious modes of living in the city (Davis 2006; Davis and Mork 2007; Kosmala and Imas 2016). Moreover, she challenges the mechanical and unreflective application of dichotomous models from the Global North, such as development vs. underdevelopment, modernized vs. traditional, center vs. periphery, etc., a dispositive that does not take into account the specific dynamics of cities in the Global South, marked by colonialism and the intertwined processes of racialization, exploitation, and inequality.

Postcolonial Urbanism has engaged in understanding the remnants of colonialism within the structures and the operating dynamics of cities in the Global South. In addition to Roy (2011a, 2011b, 2014, 2015), authors such as Patel (2006, 2014), Demissie (2013), Edensor and Jayne (2012), and Vainer (2014), who are interested in building a postcolonial or decolonial urban theory, consider that it is necessary to elaborate theoretical projects that challenge historical subalternization and, thus, ontological and typological understandings of subalternity. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the heterogeneity of urbanism from the Global South, an urbanism that cannot be contained within the familiar categories of slums or “Third World cities” (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004; Roy 2009). Overall, Postcolonial Urbanism’s criticism focuses on two sets of problems: the imperative of progress and the coloniality of urban knowledge.

The first critique addresses how ideas of modernization and development arise from an assumption of linear time where all cities, necessarily, must go through similar and determined “stages” of improvement to achieve the model of the global city, which has been conceived in Euro-North American contexts (Mabin 2015). The categorical imperative of progress, in a Western-centered capitalist world, imposes divisions between “developed” and “underdeveloped” cities, which implies, in turn, comparisons and hierarchizations that guide analysis, planning, and urban policy design.

The use of the word “modern” and the export of an ideology of modernity from cities located in the North to cities in the Global South have long been contested in discussions of hybridity, multiplicity, provincialization, subalternity, and urban planning experimentation (Feldman-Bianco 2015; Leontidou 1996; Mabin 2015). This set of critiques demonstrates the extent to which the Western city is implicitly considered more complex, dynamic, and mature than the “non-Western” city, framed as a space of deprivation and disorder (Edensor and Jayne 2012; Robinson 2002).

This equation is the legacy of modernization theory and its variants and has been echoed in several academic textbooks written and published in the North, many of them aimed at Global South planners and urbanists. In such textbooks, cities of the Global South appear as illustrations or problem laboratories, which are merely evaluated so as to be analyzed and understood through the notions and categories of the Global North.

This leads us to the second aspect of the Postcolonial Urbanism critique, what Carlos Vainer (2014) calls the coloniality of urban knowledge, which encompasses, among other dimensions, the idea of metrocentrism, a term that initially appears in the work of the geographers Tim Bunnell and Anant Maringanti (2010). This category highlights how the colonial experience still affects the theoretical production of countries in the Global South, marked by the colonization of their territory. Raewyn Connell (2011) and Julian Go (2014) use the term to reflect upon the colonial process that elevates the production of knowledge from metropolitan countries to a central denominator, underlining a series of academic dependencies of peripheral countries in regard to the Euro-North American axis. Thus, when it comes to theory production, former colonies are expected to play the role of replicators of metropolitan modes of knowledge production, which weakens or erases locally fabricated conceptual imaginations.

In urban studies, this critique demonstrates how the understanding of what cities are as well as the notion of urban have been measured by standards and principles from the Global North. From the Chicago School of Economics to Postmodern Urbanism, through the Los Angeles School of Urbanism and the French School of Urban Sociology, mainstream urban theory has focused on the city from Euro-North American experiences, particularly those of metropolises with economic and political influence—such as London, New York, Chicago, Berlin, and Paris—considered models of globalized cities (Parnell and Robinson 2012; Roy 2009). As a result, urban formations in the Global South have been relegated to metaphors of deprivation, incompleteness, disorder, or deviance, that is, to ontologically diverse combinations of the “ideal-typical.”

As Patel (2014) and Roy (2015) explain, one effect of this disjunction is that analyses regarding cities in the Global South reinforce two problems. Firstly, the novelties, interventions, and experimentations are always evaluated from an exotic viewpoint, measured by indexes of urban regeneration and vitality (Cassián-Yde 2019). Secondly, the problems are framed as supposedly inherent to their urban formations, characterized by fragmented arrangements, unfinished projects, unregulated growth, absence of planning, and social imbalance with high levels of segregation, violence, marginalization, informality, and illegality (Oliveira and Arantes 2022; Watson 2009).

Cities in the Global South are treated as precarious urban areas that have colonialism, exploitation, and underdevelopment in common (Simone 2020). The purported solutions to these problems are not found in the demands of grassroots movements but within models of development imported from the Global North, generally those that inspire ideals of modernity and innovation (Cassián-Yde 2019; Lemanski 2022). In this sense, the coloniality of urban knowledge can be defined as the disjunction that uses the experiences of a small group of supposedly global cities as a standardizing axis opposed to heterotopic formations—largely from the Global South (Vainer 2014).

The theoretical frameworks of urban studies have failed to acknowledge places and cities in peripheral contexts, with other axes, propositions, and problems (Rao 2006; Robinson 2006b). Robinson (2006b) argues for a “post colonization” of urban studies through a deconstruction of the category of “Third World city.” In her perspective, this category perpetuates a “neo-colonialist” mode of thinking, which has bowed to the imperatives of financial capitalism and the imperative of progress. It implies that, on the one hand, there are Western cities around which urban theory has been forged, and, on the other, cities in the Global South whose degree of development can only be measured in terms of the former (Choplin 2012).

Even though they lack systematization, the works of Postcolonial Urbanism seek to deconstruct how global urban studies operationalize categories that are complicit with colonial historical processes. Their authors suggest that this shift in theory is necessary to understand transformations in the conditions of how knowledge of/about cities is currently produced, which may offer relevant implications for the debate on the right to the city. Thus, they reveal the limitations of studies centered on Northern cities and, at the same time, apply a politics of recognition to those spaces and knowledge from the South that have remained at the margins of mainstream urban theory.

The City and the Global South

Urban theory produced in the Global South has been situated in a marginalized position throughout history, that is, as a product of colonialism with epistemological and geopolitical dimensions exercised by hegemonic knowledge/centers. The promotion of Global South studies on cities is intended to “realign” rather than destroy urban studies at a time of unequal globalization of urban processes under the aegis of capital (Maricato 2015; Parnell and Oldfield 2014; Santos 2000), which poses new challenges to urban studies at large. After all, as cities

expand and urban life becomes the reality for most of the world's population, what seems to occur is a "de-urbanized urbanization" (Jacobi 1986, 22), or a "corporate urbanization" (Santos 1993), dictated by the determinations of the capitalist reproduction of wealth that transforms the city into an environment of disconnection, segregation, and perpetuation of social hierarchies.³

In a book that was first published in the early 1990s, Saskia Sassen suggests that some cities are the spatial expression of a new form of global capitalism. The globalization of capital has given rise to a new type of territoriality, whose scope overflows national borders and increases dependence on multinational corporations (Sassen 1991). The sociologist presents New York, London, and Tokyo as examples of "global cities," suggesting that certain urban centers produce the necessary conditions for the reproduction of the global economic system insofar as they gather the main institutions at the core of the processes of wealth creation and concentration of power. However, several authors have described urban spaces that occupy other centers in the global dynamics, such as Johannesburg, Shanghai, São Paulo, and Hong Kong. These are cities that have redefined geopolitical forces and agitated ethnic-cultural dynamics and transnational flows of capital and labor, which impact the entire world and indicate processes that occur outside the Euro-North American axis (Balbim 2016; Edensor and Jayne 2012; Ferreira 2007; Freire 2021; Huyssen 2008; Mayaram 2012; Mbembe and Nuttall 2008; Ong and Roy 2011; Robinson 2002).

These authors oppose the idea of the global city and propose other analytical frameworks to reflect on Southern cities. In this sense, Roy (2009) advocates "new geographies of theory," explaining that theories based on the experiences of cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Paris, and London limit the capacity of urban studies to understand the complex process of change that world urban spaces, such as Mexico City, Dalian, Kinshasha, São Paulo, and Delhi, for example, have been going through. At the risk of proving irrelevant, current urban projects, and therefore the foundations of contemporary urban theory, cannot only be rooted in cities of the Global North but must also be rooted in experiences and processes that cities in Latin America, Africa, and Asia have been experiencing (Lemanski 2016; Simone 2012).

Demanding more cosmopolitan trajectories for the sources and resources of urban theory, Robinson (2002) shows how megacities from the Global South have been functioning as a theatrical "other" in the map of the world cities' cartography, and not as a fertile ground for meeting the contemporary challenges of the "urban question." The problem is that megacities are seen as a sign of an irremediable difference or a sign of irrelevance in relation to the transnational processes in shaping city economies. She also critiques the developmentalist discourse through which most cities in underprivileged countries are assessed as fundamentally lacking in qualities of "city-ness." When the discursive field of urban development ceases to be hegemonized by global cities and developmentalist approaches, she suggests, the "ordinary cities" will finally offer significant insights for both academics and policymakers in terms of diversity and multiplicity.

It is necessary to address the concentration of urban theory in capitals and large cities. Several studies have demonstrated the importance of regarding the different forms and sizes of "ordinary cities" and avoiding comparison and hierarchizations with large cities—which would

be more developed, more urban, and more modern (Bell and Jayne 2006; Robinson 2006a). This is what Robinson (2006a) does by shifting her focus toward overlooked types of cities, the “off the map” cities, defending decentered approaches to addressing contemporary urban life. The multiplicity and diversity of small and medium-sized cities establish another set of city-making experiences, a complexity that surpasses life in metropolises.

Roy (2011a), in turn, perceives the megacity not as the dialectical opposite of the global city but as the condition of its emergence. The megacity is a metonym for underdevelopment, Third-Worldism, the Global South, conjuring up an abject but uplifting human condition, one that lives in filth and sewage but at the same time is animated by an almost miraculous ability to survive and thrive, despite all ontological problems of its formation (Roy 2011a, 224).

Ong (2011) proposes forms of “worlding cities” from the Global South and advocates new approaches in urban studies on a global scale. She criticizes approaches that rely on political economy to explore comparative and classificatory analyses, positioning cities within a singular script of “planetary capitalism,” which unthinkingly incorporates narratives of modernity and progress as the only possible pathways to achieving the right to the city and the creation of more dignified lives. Postcolonial structures are fundamental to the understanding of cities of the Global South and, in this sense, it is necessary to seek, as counterpoints, the “subaltern resistances” within cities which have once been subjected to imperial domination (Roy and Ong 2011). These are heterogeneous forms of subalternity through which postcolonial cities have been negotiated and shaped (López-Morales 2013; McFarlane 2008; Yeoh 2001).

The works of Edensor and Jayne (2012), Haesbaert (2021), Myers (2011), and Simone (2010) also help to de-Westernize modes of addressing cities from the periphery of capitalism. Although such analyses focus on capital cities and metropolitan regions, they propose to transform the assumptions and conventional means of understanding informality, territorial precarization, the state of deregulation, ambiguity, self-construction, exception, and other urban “dysfunctions” by presenting non-Eurocentric concepts that do not comply with universalist pretensions. Rooted in everyday life, this body of research presents approaches based on the practices and experiences of cities outside the Euro-North American axis, rejecting narratives of absence or failure as defining elements of the ontology of the Southern cities.

Roy (2011b) and Patel (2014) demonstrate that the cities of the Global South— despite their local characteristics, and having been influenced by a colonial past— can be considered territories of the emergence of new, creative, and more inclusive urban dynamics. It is in the Global South that intense experiments in city-making are practiced. For Roy (2009), the main question is not just about incorporating and increasing the urban repertoire to include cities from the Global South, but to call attention to how restricted and incomplete the theories embedded only in the Global North are. Her criticism is directed at both Saskia Sassen and Neil Brenner, who rank cities through the idea of either the globalization of financial and informational flows or planetary urbanization (Roy 2009, 2015). Neither Sassen nor Brenner considers how new territorial arrangements can be constructed through everyday agency around consumption, social reproduction, and different strategies to dispute space. She suggests that the urban condition in

the Global South is not an expression of poor infrastructure and lack of planning but has historical specificities and particular specialities that affect the production of the right to the city at large.

Without doubt the right to the city is at the heart of the new urban agenda. Addressing its efficacy from the major challenges of Southern cities helps us not only to embrace the variety of contexts from which the right to the city has been advocated but also—as we will see in the “Decentering the Debate on the Right to the City” section—to decentralize the debate, the actions, and the policy priorities to collectively produce a decent and full urban life for all inhabitants.

Decentering the Debate on the Right to the City

The right to the city is a motto which runs through contemporary urban theory, proving to be of interest to prestigious intellectuals (Attoh 2011; Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer 2012; Chaskin and Joseph 2013; Harvey 2013; Iveson 2013; Marcuse 2009; Mayer 2012; Middleton 2018; Mitchell 2003; Purcell 2002; Soja 2010). However, how do public actors, policymakers, academics, and social movements apprehend and operationalize the concept in decentered contexts? Is it possible to rethink the right to the city from a postcolonial perspective? What does it imply in terms of political action?

As noted by Mbembe (2008), postcolonial studies do not constitute a theoretical system but a manner of thinking that derives from anticolonial and anti-imperialist struggles, on the one hand, and from the heritage of Western philosophy and of disciplines that constitute European humanities, on the other. Postcolonialism includes a variety of contributions with different orientations that share the effort to outline a decentered epistemological reference to the dominant conceptions and models of analysis through the method of deconstructing essentialisms and universalisms, as well as the critique toward Eurocentrism and metrocentrism.

A postcolonial approach to the right to the city implies a twofold critique. The first critique is oriented toward the political and ideological dimensions that guide the capitalist production of urban space, which generates a series of structural inequalities within the realm of the cities. These inequalities, such as unequal access to resources and opportunities, require collective action to be addressed effectively. As the authors of *Critical Urban Theory* have argued, these inequalities are the fuel behind demands for more inclusive urban systems, which would provide people with more dignified lives. The second critique is oriented toward the foundations of knowledge production, models, and categories that underpin urban theory and urbanism, as in *Postcolonial Urbanism* theory. In order to provincialize this theoretical-methodological body and confront the coloniality of urban knowledge and the imperatives of progress, these authors bring other experiences from cities into focus and, by doing so, they challenge how processes, experiences, dynamics, and modes of living in cities of the Global South are perceived.

These two intellectual movements converge on the need for a new form of urbanism and a new urban episteme that is better suited to address the polysemic reality of cities in the 21st century (Haesbaert 2021; Mabin 2015; Parnell and Robinson 2012; Roy 2009). A postcolonial perspective

to the right to the city not only aids in rethinking conventional models of urban theory—a call for provincializing the urban imaginaries (Leitner and Sheppard 2016), de-Westernizing urbanism (Choplin 2012), or articulating new geographies of theory (Roy 2009)—but also implies learning from the plurality of urban experiences from the Global South. This requires thinking through strategies to struggle against vulnerability and inequality, which are realities for many of those living in peripheral contexts and intrinsically connected to the inconstancies and ambiguities of the postcolonial city.

Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the impacts of colonialism on the urbanization and architecture of former European urban spaces overseas (Lima 2016). For this reason, we would like to bring some examples from geographic regions that we know best, namely Africa and Latin America—although we also refer to literature on other parts of the world.

Moassab and Anahory (2013) argue that, in analyzing the pattern of occupation of territories resulting from the rapid urbanization of African cities in the second half of the 20th century, both the impact of neoliberal globalization and the process of decolonization must be taken into account. Other authors, based on the study of postcolonial African capitals, show how the duality between the formal city and informal city was reproduced in the period post-independence (Abu-Lughod 1980; Demissie 2013; Gandy 2005; Huchzermeyer 2011), having thereby generated “broken cities” where elites occupy well-planned neighborhoods, surrounded by the informal city where most of the population lives (Maloa 2019).

In some of these African contexts, on one hand, the debate on the right to the city is intersected by issues regarding the strategies for overcoming disadvantages in access to public services, unemployment and precarious work, and spatial segregation, and on the other, by strategies mobilized collectively to face such problems through innovation and the creation of more dignified living conditions (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004; Morange and Spire 2019; Myers 2011; Simone 2005).

Other important aspects of the debate on the right to the city are issues related to housing, urban mobility, and free political expression within public space in Latin America. Some authors have highlighted the importance of struggles for dignified housing and quality public transport in defining the right to the city as a political issue (Cassián-Yde 2019; Fernandes 2007; Pardue and Oliveira 2018; Schiavo, Gelfuso, and Vera 2017). These “insurgent” or “transgressive” citizenships have led to the construction of more democratic urban spaces, which include the direct participation of minorities in processes of city-making (Agier 2015; Earle 2017; Holston 2007).

These debates have increasingly broadened the criticism of the hegemonic urban theory, showing that the right to the city must also involve discussion of inequalities and environmental racism (Acserald, Herculano, and Pádua 2004; Jesus 2020; Newell 2005), urban life and climate change (Cohen 2020; Cohen et al. 2019), urban planning and informal strategies of urbanization (Caldeira 2017; Fawaz 2009; Hernandez et al. 2010; Roy 2005), agency and the new dynamics of city-making not restricted to the Western system of meaning (Berney 2011; Boano, Lamarca, and Hunter 2011; Simone 2001).

A postcolonial approach to the right to the city also includes debates on segregation, housing policy, and gentrification (Appadurai 2000; Caldeira 1996; Christopher 2001; Lees et al. 2016; Zhang 2004), migration, conflict, and forced dislocation (Archer and Dodman 2017; Darling 2017; Roitman 2004; Sanyal 2012; Smith 2006; Zhang 2002), as well as security, illegality, and criminalization (Auyero 2000; Caldeira 2000; Wacquant 2008).

Chatterjee (2004), Simone (2005), and Holston (2007), for instance, problematize the right to the city in countries where vestiges of colonialism persist in the form of spatial segregation and exclusion of certain racialized groups. The authors show the extent to which it is necessary to distinguish between demands for a rightful place in the city among the ones who are considered citizens and the subaltern populations, whose “cries” and “demands” are at the margins of the law (Murray 2013). In this case, it is essential to address how illegality, informality, and transgression are survival strategies for social groups that have historically been left at the margins of the city and therefore engage in a wide variety of underground tactics that place them outside the law.

A postcolonial approach to the right to the city encompasses how different agents, under locally diverse conditions, resist the planetary processes of urbanization and the “capitalist creative destruction” of urban space on a global scale. Hence, it seeks to show that the right to the city is not reduced to a political slogan that merely emerges through local protests, nor to institutional agendas or abstract formulations of scholars or state agents (Tavolari 2016). Both approaches, if considered separately, empty the right to the city of content and equate it with a reformist legal language (Kuymulu 2013). A reflection regarding the right to the city from a postcolonial perspective allows us to perceive such demands in a stretched and decentered manner, avoiding all kinds of essentializations and presupposing prior normative frameworks, so as to build an expanded urban revolution at the level of theory and practice (Harvey 2013).

Final Remarks

The right to the city has not only been a recurrent political slogan (Balbim 2016; Harvey 2008), a statement exerting a global impact (Marcuse 2014; Purcell 2003) but also the object of renewed interest within the academic realm, circles of political activism, as well as programs of city-makers and other public and private agents. As noted from the literature, the right to the city permeates the debate regarding the construction of urban societies that are free from the impositions of neoliberal globalization, which leads us to design, in terms of theory and practice, more inclusive, equitable, and less segregated cities.

As we have demonstrated, from the standpoint of postcolonial spaces and theories, the debate on the right to the city may be analyzed on a range of social, political, economic, cultural, and spatial axes, which have offered renewed engagements within the urban question from across the social sciences. Lefebvre’s motto on the right to the city has led us to answer questions such as: after all, which rights are we referring to? The right to comprehensive citizenship? The right to complete access to the places within the city? The right to come and go, which should in principle define

the very existence of urban space? The right to build the city collectively? The right to occupy the city with bodies, desires, policies, demands, agency, experiences, and creative processes that drive the production of the future?

These questions have been long-standing subjects in the urban theory. Reflecting the right to the city means projecting a “becoming-city” and, consequently, the future. The production of such future urban societies must be collective and because it is collective, it inevitably involves disputes, tensions, and negotiations between established powers and insurgent citizenships, hegemonies and counter-hegemonies. This encounter dynamizes the processes of production of space as it exposes the common roots of deprivation, injustice, and dissatisfaction, showing the shared nature of the aspirations of most people.

While Critical Urban Theory was important, on the one hand, in rejecting hegemonic urbanism and the capitalist ways of producing the urban space, and, on the other, in broadening the debate on the right to the city toward more democratic forms of city-making, Postcolonial Urbanism posed crucial questions about the very idea of the city implied in urban theory centered predominantly on Western contexts. By decentering and situating theory, Postcolonial Urbanism proposed ways to reimagine the city from the Global South and non-Eurocentric concepts that do not comply with the imperative of progress and the coloniality of urban knowledge. The scholarship that analyses these cities from a postcolonial perspective based on case studies and ethnographic work rejects the reductive frameworks of the models from the Global North and demonstrates that these cities—whether they are capitals, large cities, or ordinary cities—are territories of struggles, agencies, and urban experiences that demand methodological and theoretical imaginations forged within their contexts.

Decentering the debate on the right to the city from a postcolonial perspective means, among other things, operationalizing the slogan proposed by Lefebvre within and from these localized contexts. A new epistemology on the right to the city means analyzing the implications and responsibilities of all the subjects involved in city-making; crossing theoretical frameworks with new challenges posed by cities in peripheral contexts, with other axes, propositions, and problems; and learning from the plurality of these urban experiences to produce a more egalitarian and dignified city for the future. Therefore, a postcolonial approach to the right to the city should problematize the extent to which we can effectively politicize the common and shared ground constituted by the city and transform it into a work of—and for—people, as Lefebvre intended, not just toward profit or the maintenance of social, racial, and gender hierarchies.

Links to Digital and Visual Materials

Abhlali base Mjondolo Shackdwellers' Movement South Africa <http://abahlali.org/>.

Radical Urbanism Conference <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkKXt6lTTD4>. Concluding panel with Peter Marcuse, Margit Mayer, Susan Fainstein, David Harvey (2008).

“At the Threshold of Empire: Sanctuary Cities in the Age of Trumpism <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5D8nWIDExLU>,” lecture by Ananya Roy (2019).

Short Film—"The Right to the City" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXV3St0JlsA>".

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Notes

1. "South" has both a geographical and political connotation, implying a discussion about Latin America, Africa, and Asia, as well as a common political history of colonialism (Patel 2014).
2. Currently a field of academic expertise, as noted by Chaturvedi (2000), Subaltern Studies emerged from a group formed by Ranajit Guha, a dissident theorist from Indian Marxism, whose main project was to reassess not only the colonial historiography of India produced by Europeans but also the Eurocentric Indian nationalist historiography itself, as well as the orthodox Marxist historiography produced in the second half of the 20th century in his country.
3. According to the 2018 Revision of World Urbanization Prospects (United Nations 2018), more than 55 percent of the world's population lives in urban areas, a proportion that is expected to increase to 70 percent by 2050, with more than 90 percent of the growth occurring in the Global South.